

MAIDLIN BEARS
THE TORCH

ELSIE J. OXENHAM



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: Maidlin Bears the Torch

Date of first publication: 1937

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

Date first posted: Jan. 20, 2020

Date last updated: Jan. 20, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200137

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



[See page [141](#)

'GAIL, TELL ME! DIDN'T YOU SAVE ELIZABETH FROM A FIRE?'

MAIDLIN BEARS THE TORCH

AN ABBEY STORY

by
ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

*Author of "Rosamund's Tuckshop,"
"Peggy and the Brotherhood,"
etc.*

LONDON
THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER OFFICE
4 BOUVERIE STREET, E.C.4

All rights reserved

Made in Great Britain

TO
MY FATHER
JOHN OXENHAM

To whose unending sympathy
and encouragement
we owe so much

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
1	A SURPRISE FOR BENEDICTA	9
2	MADALENA SINGS	20
3	ONE CHANCE IN A THOUSAND	27
4	MAIDLIN UNDERSTANDS	37
5	THE CAMP FIRE ON THE GARTH	48
6	MAIDLIN HELPS	60
7	WELCOMED BY ROSAMUND	69
8	MAIDLIN'S STORY	79
9	ROSAMUND'S WARNING	89
10	JEN IN THE SHADOW	99
11	ROSAMUND'S TOY-SHOP	108
12	BENEDICTA SPEAKS OUT	118
13	THE TUCK-SHOP LADY	127
14	THE MESSENGER	136
15	THE MESSAGE	143
16	KISSED BY A COUNTESS	152
17	GAIL GROWS UP	162
18	TROUBLE FOR JOY	170
19	JOY FACES HER PROBLEM	180
20	JOY DECIDES	189
21	THE TWINS ARE MISSING	197
22	THE TWINS IN THE ABBEY	204
23	THE NIGHT-STAIR	215
24	BENEDICTA PAYS THE PRICE	226
25	MAIDLIN IS WANTED	234
26	THE RETURN OF THE COUNTESS	243
27	THE TORCH	250

CHAPTER I

A SURPRISE FOR BENEDICTA

‘And I wish to speak to Benedicta Bennett in my room, in half-an-hour.’ The headmistress ended her list of announcements.

Then she laughed, at sight of Benney’s startled face.

‘Oh, there’s nothing the matter! Don’t look so worried, Benney. I’m sorry I frightened you. I have a message from your mother; something pleasant.’ And she left Benney to think it over.

‘We wondered what you’d been doing, old Ben,’ one of her friends called across the classroom.

‘So did I!’ Benney said fervently. ‘When she called me Benedicta I nearly died. I knew I hadn’t done anything.’

‘Thought you might have been having a final fling, before saying good-bye to us for ever.’

‘Don’t rub it in,’ Benney pleaded. ‘I want to go to this new place; it sounds marvellous. But I hate the thought of leaving you all.’

‘So do we. You might have stayed with us for one more year.’

‘Oh, but I’m fifteen, and I’m going to specialise,’ Benney’s tone was full of importance. ‘Mother’s discovered this place that goes in for all sorts of outdoor stunts, and that’s what I want. I’ll never be any good at exams, because of my maths. I’m going to be a vet., or a kennel maid.’

‘You won’t be a vet. without exams, my good child,’ said a senior. ‘Not a real one.’

‘I wonder what Mother wants!’ Benedicta changed the subject. ‘Two days before the end of term! You’d think she could wait till Friday; she’ll have me to talk to then!’

She wondered throughout the half-hour of suspense, and was still puzzled as she went to the head’s study.

She was small for fifteen, with very brown eyes and short hair, which curled about her neck and was so very fair that it was almost white. Her face was full of curiosity as she looked at Miss Carstairs.

‘I have a letter from your mother, Benney. She asks me to send you home this afternoon, as she has tickets for a concert in the New Royal Hall, and she wants to take you with her. I understand she is taking your cousin, and she is anxious to have you for company for her. She will send you back to us early to-morrow, for the last two days of the term.’

Benney put in a word eagerly. 'Clare always goes to concerts; she's fearfully keen on music. If her people couldn't go, they'd send the tickets to Mother, and ask her to look after Clare. But why doesn't Father go? Or Jim?'

'Your father has an engagement. I believe your brother is not able to go either.'

Benney's eyes danced. 'Miss Carstairs, is it an Ivor Quellyn concert? I mean, is he the conductor?'

'That is so,' the head agreed. 'Why?'

'Jim doesn't like him. He won't go to a Quellyn concert. That's why Mother's taking me.'

'I don't suppose your brother's dislike will worry Sir Ivor Quellyn,' Miss Carstairs said dryly. 'Why doesn't he like Sir Ivor?'

'There was a girl,' Benney explained. 'She was Sir Ivor's ward, and Jim was terribly keen on her. That old composer who died last summer was her grandfather—Alwyn, the man who wrote such weird stuff; I thought it was weird stuff, but Jim liked it. Jim was keen on Gail, the girl, and wanted to be friends; but I don't think she knew. She disappeared, and Jim says Sir Ivor has sent her away somewhere and he can't find out where. He asked Quellyn—I mean Sir Ivor!—when he met him at a reception one day; Jim knows all the musical people in London, and some day he'll be famous. He's written some music already. Sir Ivor wasn't nice—Jim says he was rude; and he wouldn't say where Gail had gone.'

'And was this girl as young as your brother?' asked the head. 'He is only a few years older than you, isn't he?'

'Jim's twenty. Gail was only sixteen.'

'Then Sir Ivor was right, and I have no sympathy with Jim,' Miss Carstairs said ruthlessly. 'No doubt Sir Ivor has plans for his ward's career, and he has her training to consider. It will be time enough for your brother to think about her seriously if he meets her again in five years' time.'

'That's what Mother and I think,' Benney agreed. 'But Jim can't see it. He doesn't want to wait. He's an ass—I mean, a silly boy!—not to go to the Quellyn concerts. He might see Gail at one of them. I'm always telling him so.'

'I should have thought it was obvious. Well, Benney, if your brother chooses to sulk, the gain is yours. The concert is a good one, and it has a point of special interest. The soloist will be a young girl singer, who has never sung in public in London. She is a protégée of Sir Ivor's, and is partly Italian; she has an Italian name, but she is half English, I believe. Sir Ivor thinks highly of her voice, and he is introducing her to the public to-night.'

She is quite young; you will be interested to hear her first performance, and perhaps she will become one of our great singers.'

'Oh, good! I'll love that! What's her name, Miss Carstairs?'

'Madalena di Ravarati. She's very pretty, so you can weave all sorts of romantic dreams about her,' the head said, laughing. 'I'd go to hear her myself, if I could possibly get away.'

'Jim ought to go. He is an idiot!' Benney murmured, as she went off to tell the rest of her form of her good luck.

She repeated her opinion to Jim, when he brought the car to fetch her just after tea. The school was in a western suburb of London, and Benedicta's home was not far away.

'Jim, you ass! Why don't you go to the concert with Mother? You might see Gail there, silly!'

Jim frowned. 'Chuck it, Ben. I'm not going to any of that fellow's shows.'

'That's mad. Sir Ivor Quellyn won't know whether you're there or not. It only does you out of a jolly lot of fun. You're keen on good music.'

'Oh, dry up!' growled her brother. His intercourse with Sir Ivor had included more than Benney had told Miss Carstairs. Jim, ambitious but inexperienced, had composed what he called a Heroic March and had sent it to the great conductor for criticism, with high hopes that the criticism would be enthusiastic praise. Instead, Sir Ivor had returned the music with a courteous, but definite, suggestion that the writer was too young to know enough about heroism, and that he must study the rules of composition for some years before he attempted anything so elaborate. Jim had been bitterly hurt, and Sir Ivor's later refusal to tell him where his ward, Gail Alwyn, had gone when she left town had been the final blow. Jim refused to be one of the admiring host who cheered Quellyn whenever he appeared on a platform, and would not go to any concert of which he was the conductor.

'Well, I'm jolly glad you don't want to go to-night,' Benney assured him. 'But I should have thought you'd want to hear this new Italian girl who's going to sing. Miss Carstairs says she's partly English, but she sounds all Italian. Clare will love her; she's mad about contraltos. I'd rather have the orchestra. I wonder what she'll sing?'

Jim had read the accounts of the new contralto. He answered the question curtly. 'Some songs by Lady Quellyn, for one thing.'

'The new Lady Quellyn? The one Sir Ivor's just married?' Benney cried in excitement. 'Does she write songs? Oh, how jolly of the Italian girl! Is she a friend of theirs?'

'Lives with them. I expect the songs are amateurish,' Jim said gloomily. 'He'll have to put her stuff in his programmes now.'

‘It doesn’t sound like Sir Ivor Quellyn. He knows good things, you bet.’

It was an unfortunate remark, and Benney realised it the moment she had spoken, for she had known all about the fate of the Heroic March. She lapsed into contrite silence after a glance at Jim’s grim face, and sat thinking over what she had heard of Sir Ivor’s recent marriage to the beautiful young widow, who had lost her explorer husband nearly eight years before.

Then the car drew up at the door, and there were excited greetings to her parents, sympathy for her father because he must miss the concert for a stuffy business dinner, a quick change into a white frock and a hurried meal, and she and her mother were off again in the car, to call for Clare on their way to town.

When they had gone, Jim carried the portable wireless up to his den. He had no intention of missing the Italian girl’s début, though nothing would have induced him to go to the concert. In the solitude of his own room he could banish the thought of Sir Ivor Quellyn receiving the rapturous applause of the crowd.

The wireless would not have satisfied Benedicta and Clare. Clare went to concerts continually, but it was Benney’s first experience of a big evening event, and she was thrilled by every moment—the sight of the crowded hall, the gathering of the orchestra and the tuning-up, the strangeness of some of the instruments, which Clare said were the horns and the tuba.

Clare seized her arm. ‘Look, Ben! In that box! It must be the new Lady Quellyn, just coming in—marvellous red hair! Oh, look, look! Are they twins? Oh, what sweet kids!’

‘They’re too little to come to an evening concert. They won’t be good,’ Benney whispered, gazing fascinated as Lady Quellyn sat down, with a red-haired twin on each side of her. The children were not quite eight years old, but they seemed impressed by the importance of the occasion, and their behaviour, so far, was perfect. One seemed excited and kept looking up at her mother and asking questions; the other surveyed the hall and the crowd with serious brown eyes, then broke into a little laugh of amusement as Sir Ivor entered and the tumult of applause broke out. Lady Quellyn said a word and began to clap, and the two joined in enthusiastically.

‘They’re the image of her.’ Benney gazed in ecstatic delight at the three, who, with their bronze hair cut short and waving naturally, were so very much alike.

‘I’ve heard about those twins,’ said Mrs. Bennett. ‘They say Sir Ivor is very fond of his step-daughters.’

‘Do you think they’ll be good all through the concert? They’re too little to be out so late,’ said Clare.

‘I expect it’s a very special occasion. Isn’t the Italian girl a friend of Lady Quellyn’s?’ Benney whispered. ‘Perhaps they’ve come to hear her sing.’

‘I’m quite sure Lady Quellyn wouldn’t have brought them unless she could trust them to behave,’ Mrs. Bennett remarked.

‘I suppose not,’ Clare conceded. ‘I expect they’ve been trained to listen to music. I like this new hall! I’ve never been in it before.’

The applause died down, as Sir Ivor turned to the orchestra. He raised his baton, and Clare lapsed into concentration on the overture.

Benney’s interest was centred in the group in the box. She could not take her eyes off the bronze-haired mother and children. The twins relaxed and were still, one sitting upright, watching and listening with keen attention, the other lying quietly against her mother’s arm. Both kept darting quick glances up at Lady Quellyn’s face, as if to be sure she was enjoying herself as much as they were. She smiled down at them, and they turned to watch their stepfather again. It was still a new experience to them to have a father, and this was the first time they had been allowed to come with their mother, though they had often listened to his concerts at home.

‘I wonder what their names are!’ Benney thought. ‘There’s someone else with them, sitting behind. I suppose she’d take them out if they got tired. I can just see her; tall and pretty, with yellow hair. I wonder if she’s their nurse? More likely a friend; a nurse wouldn’t wear a white frock like that. Perhaps she’s their aunt.’

The overture to ‘Figaro’ came to its triumphant end, and Lady Quellyn spoke to the girl who sat behind. The excitement of the twins seemed rising; the more lively one was on her feet, jumping up and down; her sister held her by the arm and seemed to be warning her. Her mother said a word, too, and she subsided into her chair, but leaned over the front of the box with sparkling brown eyes.

Sir Ivor had left the platform. He appeared again, leading a slim, small girl in white, whose great dark eyes swept over the hall and the audience just once, then sought the box where her friends were sitting. She gave them a little smile; then, in spite of the tension of the moment, she laughed, for above the applause with which the audience was encouraging her, a child’s voice had rung out in greeting. Several others heard it, and glanced up at the family party and smiled, for the twins were clapping frantically to welcome their friend, and one was being admonished by the laughing girl in white.

Then the clapping died away and the singer, looking small and lonely but very composed, stood ready, as the introduction to the aria from an opera began. And then came a breathless hush as she sang, and her voice filled the hall and soared above the orchestra.

In the stalls Mrs. Bennett was gripping Benney's arm. '*Benedicta! Be quiet!* I'll take you home at the end of the song!'

'But, Mother! Don't you see——'

'Yes, I see. Be quiet, or you'll go right out into the street!'

Benney bit her lip and controlled herself by a mighty effort. Her wild cry of amazement at the Italian girl's appearance had been drowned by the applause. Only those nearest had heard her bewildered exclamation—'But I know her! Mother, it's the Daffodil girl! Oh, Mother, don't you see?'

She sat staring at the singer. Yes, she had seen her before. There was a difference; that day in France the girl's black hair had been coiled over her ears in thick plaits, and now it was rolled up behind, low on her neck; it altered the look of her face, but the eyes were the same, big and clear and very dark, and it was same smile, breaking out suddenly from a rather grave expression, as she looked up at the twins and their mother. Benney remembered that sudden smile very well. The dress made a difference too; the white evening frock was very simple, but it was a great change from the little yellow suit and the white frilled apron which the girl in France had worn. But she was the same girl; there was no possible doubt of it—the girl who had forgotten their order in the restaurant in Annecy and had come back to apologise and to ask what they wanted, and about whose eyes Jim had made the remark which she had unfortunately understood.

'We thought she was French,' Benney chuckled. 'And she went red and said, "I'm so sorry. I'm English." And Jim felt awful! It *is* the same girl, and I haven't heard a word of her song, but I know it was marvellous!'

A storm of applause had broken out. The twins in the box were jumping and clapping and shouting. The singer seemed to wake from a dream; she gave a quick, shy look round, bowed and bowed again, turned to give a special curtsy towards the box where her friends sat, and then escaped thankfully from the platform.

'She'll have to come back,' said Mrs. Bennett. 'Sir Ivor is going to fetch her. It's a wonderful voice; I'm glad he has discovered her.'

'Mother, it is our girl from Annecy!' Benney pleaded. 'The one with the eyes; Jim's girl, with the daffodil in her hair!'

'I thought Jim's girl was Abigail Ann Alwyn,' said Clare.

'Oh, but this is another one! Mother—yes, I see; she's going to sing again. It *is* our girl, isn't it, Mother?'

'Yes, I'm sure it is, Benney. But you must be quiet, you know.'

'I'm going to listen this time. I didn't hear a word of the first thing, I was so stunned,' Benney whispered, and settled down to listen to Madalena di Ravarati's second song, a gay little ballad—

‘Silvy, Silvy, all on one day,
She dressed herself in man’s array,
A sword and pistol all by her side,
To meet her true love she did ride.’

CHAPTER II

MADALENA SINGS

Someone had brought an enormous basket of daffodils. Sir Ivor lifted them to the platform and handed them to Madalena. Shy colour rushed into her face as she bowed again, to the audience, to Lady Quellyn, to the orchestra.

‘Not many girls can curtsy like that,’ Mrs. Bennett said, laughing. ‘I wonder where she learned that lovely movement? She’s very graceful. I remember we remarked on the way she walked about the tea-shop.’

‘Aunty, what is it all about?’ Clare pleaded. ‘Why is Ben off her head about this girl? If it was because of her singing I could understand it, for she’s simply marvellous. But it’s something else. What’s wrong with Benney? And why are you talking about a tea-shop?’

‘We’ll tell you the story in the interval,’ Mrs. Bennett promised. ‘This is the symphony. There isn’t time just now.’

The girls perforce settled into silence as Beethoven’s Fourth began. But all through the beautiful movements of the symphony Clare was wondering about the story she was to hear and Benney’s thoughts were back in Annecy.

‘It was two years ago.’ She turned excitedly to her cousin at the first opportunity. ‘We were coming home from Italy, and we spent a few days in Annecy. One day we went for lunch to a café, and almost at once we noticed the girl who was the waitress. It was this girl, Madalena di Ravarati, but we never heard her name then. She was dressed as a waitress, with a little apron, but instead of a cap she had a daffodil stuck in her hair; her hair was done in saucers over her ears. We noticed how prettily she walked; that’s what Mother means. She seemed such a kid to be doing the job; we spoke to her, and she told us she was only doing it for one day, to help a friend who had been taken ill, because the people of the café had been so kind to her and a friend of hers. We could see she wasn’t used to it; she forgot our order and had to come back and ask us to say it again. We saw she wasn’t a proper shop-girl, and we argued over what to do about the tip. Father asked her what she’d do if he gave her ten francs, and she said it was too much, but she’d give it to her friend, who was ill. We thought she was French, and she didn’t know we were English, for she’d asked for our order in French. So Jim said something about her eyes—they are rather marvellous, you know!—and she went all red and hot, and said she was so sorry, but she was English. We laughed, and Jim felt awful, and Mother said she didn’t look

English, so she said she was half Italian. We asked her name, but she didn't tell us.'

'She said we wouldn't remember it, and she was right,' said Mrs. Bennett.

'We never saw her again, though we went back next day,' Benedicta went on. 'Then we had to come home, but Jim kept thinking about her, and on his next trip he went back to Annecy and looked for her, but, of course, she wasn't there. He asked the café people to tell him her name and address, but they said mademoiselle wouldn't like it. So we've never been able to find out who she was. Now can you imagine how I felt when she came on to that platform and began to sing? I could have shrieked with joy!'

'You nearly did,' Clare commented. 'But it's a weird story; I don't wonder you were thrilled. Why was she being a waitress in a tea-shop?'

'That's what I want to know,' Benney said fervently.

Her mother touched her arm. 'Don't stare too hard, Benney. Madalena di Ravarati is in the box with Lady Quellyn.'

Benney and Clare could just see her, in the back of the box, sitting with the tall, fair girl in white, while Lady Quellyn turned to speak to her and the twins leaned on her knee and gazed up into her face, asking questions.

'She's one of the family, evidently. I expect that's why they brought the children; it's a very great occasion,' Mrs. Bennett remarked.

'A very great occasion for us too,' Benney murmured. 'It's top-hole to have found her, after all this time!'

'The twins have been jolly good,' said Clare. 'They'll never forget it.'

'I shall have simply reams to tell the girls to-morrow!' Benney sighed happily. 'I am so glad I'm going back to school for two days! They'll all die with envy when they hear.'

In the second half of the programme came the group of songs written by Lady Quellyn, and it seemed to many of the audience that Madalena's beautiful voice was even more beautiful in these; she sang them with evident love and appreciation, and at the end, when she had acknowledged the roar of applause, she turned towards the composer in the box and made a funny little bob of a curtsy.

'Like we do in country-dancing,' Benney whispered. 'I wonder if she knows it's a country-dance bob?'

'I expect Sir Ivor's pleased,' Glare said. 'Her singing's marvellous.'

'Somehow I don't think he is quite pleased,' Mrs. Bennett remarked.

'Oh, Aunt, why not? What more could he want?'

'I don't know, but I fancy there's something more. He isn't quite satisfied. You girls were looking at her when he gave her those flowers, but I was watching him, and there was an odd expression on his face. It was as if

he were saying: "You can have this floral tribute, my child, but you haven't been a really good girl." I wonder what had disappointed him?"

'Not her voice,' Clare argued. 'It's perfect.'

'No, not her voice. There may have been something in her manner that hadn't quite pleased him. "Disappointed" is too strong a word; he just wasn't quite satisfied. But he looked to me rather as if it was just what he'd expected, whatever it was.'

'I thought she was lovely, in every way,' Benney exclaimed.

'Aunty, you couldn't see all that in his face!' Clare protested.

'Oh yes, she could. She's good at reading faces.'

Mrs. Bennett laughed. 'Perhaps I imagined it. I don't suppose we shall ever know. Now, girls!'—as Sir Ivor came to his platform again.

'I thought they'd take those babies home, when the songs were over,' Benney murmured.

'One of them's going to sleep,' Clare whispered. 'The lively one; and the other looks sleepy too. They don't care about Alwyn's music. Well, how could they?'

'I don't blame them,' Benney agreed. 'I don't like it a bit.'

'Sir Ivor Quellyn does. He's always putting Alwyn's things in his programme. I don't care for it very much.'

Mrs. Bennett frowned and the girls subsided. Clare tried loyally to follow the difficult music. Benedicta, as before, found her amusement in watching the family group. One twin had fallen asleep on her mother's lap. The tall girl in white, with yellow hair coiled low on her neck, moved quietly into the place of the second twin and drew the tired child into her arms. The door of the box opened, and Madalena slipped in and sat down behind her friends, and Lady Quellyn greeted her with a smile.

'Ben! Wake up! Put your coat on!' Clare scolded, when the concert was over.

'I was watching those sleepy twins being wakened and put into their coats,' Benney chuckled. 'They're still half asleep. Look, Clare! Green coats and berets; they're lovely in green!'

'Come along, girls,' and Mrs. Bennett led the way out.

One last great satisfaction came to crown the evening for Benedicta. The car was held up for several minutes at Oxford Circus, and next to it in the traffic block was a big saloon; Sir Ivor sat beside the chauffeur, and Lady Quellyn, Madalena and the friend were in the back, with the twins lying sleepily in the arms of their mother and the yellow-haired girl. The windows of both cars were open, and the conversation in the big saloon could be clearly heard.

'How did it feel?' Lady Quellyn asked. 'I was proud of you, Maidie.'

Madalena gave a low laugh. ‘Ivor wasn’t. Did you see how he glared at me? He gave me a dreadful look along with those flowers!’

‘You were just what I expected, Madalena,’ said Sir Ivor over his shoulder. ‘You’re hopeless.’

Madalena laughed again, and the other girl protested. ‘Ivor Quellyn, how can you? She was a great success. They were crazy about her; all the papers will be raving about our new contralto.’

‘I’m well aware of that,’ he retorted. ‘But that’s the end of it. She’ll sing at concerts; I wanted her to go on.’

‘Thanks, Ivor, but I don’t want to go on.’

‘I believe you could do it, if you would,’ he grumbled. ‘Where’s your Italian side? You were all North-Country English to-night, without—— Ah, at last!’

The cars moved on. Benney glanced up at her mother. ‘What did Sir Ivor mean? I suppose we shouldn’t have listened, but I couldn’t help hearing, and there was no harm in it.’

‘I couldn’t hear what they said, Benney.’

‘Lady Quellyn calls her Maidie. He said—oh, that she’d be good enough for concerts, but she couldn’t go on to something else, and she said she didn’t want to. And he said she was hopeless and all North-Country English, without something-or-other; and then we moved on. And the other girl scolded him for scolding her. She—Madalena—didn’t seem a scrap upset that he wasn’t pleased.’

‘I expect he’d like to make her sing in opera, and she isn’t suited to it. She hasn’t a sign of the actress in her, that I could see. Perhaps that’s what he meant.’

‘She isn’t a bit actressy,’ Clare agreed. ‘What a lot I have to tell Mother to-night!’

‘And Jim! He’ll gnash his teeth when he hears what he’s missed,’ Benney chuckled. ‘I *am* so glad he doesn’t like Sir Ivor Quellyn!’

CHAPTER III

ONE CHANCE IN A THOUSAND

‘Jim! Jim! We’ve found her—your girl with the big eyes and the daffodil! Oh, Jim, you ought to have heard her sing!’ Benedicta rushed into the house, calling wildly for her brother.

Jim strolled out of his den and stared at her. ‘Who? The Italian girl? I did hear her. Big voice; what’s she like?’

‘Oh, you listened! But you should have been there! Jim, she’s your girl—our girl! The waitress at Annecy!’

‘Great Scott! Have you gone batty, Ben?’

‘Not a scrap. Ask Mother! She—Madalena di Ravarati—came out to sing, and I could just see her yellow frock and frilly apron, and that daffodil in her hair, instead of her evening rig-out. She’s terribly pretty in evening things, Jim!’

‘Look here, Ben! Do you really mean it was that same girl?’ Jim demanded, astounded. ‘Mother, what is the kid talking about?’

‘Our pretty little shy waitress, turned into a public singer and a protégée of Sir Ivor Quellyn. She had a great success.’

‘Oh, I heard that! But—that girl! Why was she a waitress?’ Jim marvelled.

‘She told us. She was doing it to help a friend, who was ill. She said it was only for one day,’ Benney reminded him. ‘She’s lovely, Jim! Don’t you wish you’d been there?’

‘I’ll find out about her,’ said Jim, still incredulous. ‘I know a fellow in the orchestra—several, in fact. They’ll know all about her.’

‘Oh, ask an oboe! Or the tuba! It would be so posh to say you’d heard about her from the tuba!’ Benney cried.

‘Bed, Benedicta!’ said her mother. ‘Remember you have to go back to school to-morrow.’

‘I’m dying to go. I’ve volumes to tell the girls.’ And Benney went up to bed, to dream of that happy evening.

‘Don’t tell the girls everything,’ her mother advised next morning, as she sent her off in the car. ‘Don’t repeat what you overheard, for instance.’

‘Um—no, perhaps not. All right, Mother, I won’t. There’s plenty to tell without that.’

‘Plenty, I should say. Quite enough to keep you busy for a day and a half,’ Mrs. Bennett said, laughing.

Benney's first question, when she sprang out of the car on Friday afternoon, was—'Where's Jim? Has he found out any more? What did his oboe man tell him?'

'Have you been dreaming about that concert?' Mrs. Bennett remonstrated. 'Jim will be home to dinner; he'll tell you anything he knows then. What about school? Were the farewells very tearful? Was Miss Carstairs sorry to lose you?'

'She said so,' Benney said flippantly. 'I know the girls were sorry. We all felt bad; they wish I was coming back next term. I'd rather talk about Madalena, if you don't mind, Mother. Did you keep the papers for me? Are they very pleased about her singing?'

'I've kept them all. They say very nice things about her. I'm sure her friends will be proud.'

'Even if Sir Ivor Quellyn isn't satisfied! I didn't tell anybody about that. Oh, Jim! Tell me all about it! Is she going to sing anywhere else? Can we go and hear her again? Where does she live? And who exactly is she? Any relation to Sir Ivor?'

'Care to go and see her to-morrow?' Jim asked airily, hanging up his overcoat.

'Jim! Jim, what do you mean?'

'Don't shriek like that, Ben, or I won't tell you.'

'Well, why did you say it? You couldn't mean it! Jim, tell me what you meant!'

'I don't say you'll see her,' Jim remarked. 'But there's always a chance. We had luck that day in Annecy; it might happen again.'

'But where does she live? How can we go to see her?'

'The chap I asked told me all he knew; not very much, but enough to start on. They call her "The little Ravarati"; Quellyn wanted her to be an opera singer, but she hasn't a scrap of dramatic instinct, and it's a thing no one can teach her. She doesn't want to do it; she's quite pleased to sing, but she doesn't want to act.'

Benney looked at her mother, who nodded, and said, 'We had guessed that. What do you mean about going to see her, Jim?'

'She lives with the Quellyns down in Oxfordshire, at Lady Quellyn's place near Princes Risborough. Lady Quellyn adopted her ten years ago, when she was left an orphan; her father must have been Italian, of course; I don't know that part of the story.'

'But we can't go and say we want to see her!' Benedicta cried, wide-eyed. 'You aren't proposing to call on Sir Ivor, are you?'

'Ass!' her brother retorted. 'Don't be in such a hurry.' He looked at his mother. 'There's a ruin in the grounds of their house and it's open to the

public; an old Abbey or something. It would be good for Ben's education to see it. She ought to see ruins and learn history.'

'And we might, just possibly, see somebody!' Benney gave a shout. 'Some of the family might be in the ruins! The twins might be playing there! Oh, Mother, let's go to-morrow! It's only an hour's run! For the first day of the hols! Oh, Mother, do!'

Mrs. Bennett laughed. 'Don't be so absurd, Ben! I'm quite willing to go; I like old places and I've never heard of this Abbey. But it's most unlikely you'll see anybody interesting; you must be prepared for that. If the ruins are so close to Lady Quellyn's house she won't go into them during the hours the public are admitted.'

'She's probably bored stiff with them,' said Jim. 'But if you'd like to go I'll drive you down.'

'If! I'm dying to go!' Benney cried. 'And I believe we shall see her—"the little Ravarati," you know. I believe we'll have luck again. If we don't, I don't see why Mother shouldn't call and ask to see her, and say we'd recognised her as our girl from Annecy, and we wanted to tell her how much we'd enjoyed her singing. There'd be no harm in that. She liked us, that day in the café; she said she'd know us again, because we'd been so kind. You *could* go and call on her, Mother!'

'No, I wouldn't do that,' Mrs. Bennett said. 'If we met her by accident I would remind her of our first meeting, but I couldn't intrude on her in her home just for that.'

'But you'll come with Jimmy and me to-morrow?' Benedicta pleaded. 'We'd need you, Mother! If we should have the luck to see her, we wouldn't dare to speak to her! It would have to be you.'

Mrs. Bennett laughed. 'I'll come with you for a picnic in the country, and we'll call and see these ruins. We may find some early primroses in the woods, although it's not quite Easter. But I warn you, Benney, that it's a thousand chances to one that woods and primroses and ruins will be all you'll see.'

'There's the one chance in a thousand, Benney urged. 'Let's try our luck, Mother! Jim, you're a sport! Was it the tuba man who told you? Had he got himself unwound from his coils?'

'No, it was a 'cellist,' Jim said curtly. Then he added, 'Was there another girl in the box with the Quellyn crowd?'

Benedicta stared. 'Yes! What about her? We thought perhaps she was the twins' aunt.'

'What was she like?'

'Oh—pretty! Yellow hair—white frock—tall.'

‘Very handsome and distinguished-looking, and carried herself well,’ his mother added. ‘Why, Jim?’

‘She was the future Countess of Kentisbury. She’s marrying the Earl next week; she’s being married from Lady Quellyn’s place. They say she and the Ravarati girl are chums; grew up together, or something.’

‘Did Lady Quellyn adopt her too? My aunt, how interesting!’ Benney cried. ‘I didn’t know I was staring at a future Countess! I must write and tell Clare. What a pity they’ve gone away! Clare would have liked to go with us to-morrow. Did the ’cello tell you anything more, Jim? What are the Quellyn twins called?’

‘They aren’t Quellyn twins, Ben,’ said Mrs. Bennett. ‘Their mother has only been married to Sir Ivor for a few months.’

‘I forgot; I suppose they have another name. How odd to have a different name from your mother! What is their name, Jim?’

‘Marchwood. Their father was Marchwood, the explorer.’

‘I remember. He died before they were born,’ said Mrs. Bennett. ‘They have never had a father until now.’

‘I wonder how they like having one, and if Sir Ivor is a nice one!’ Benney remarked.

‘Shouldn’t think so. He’ll bully them,’ and Jim strolled away, followed by his sister’s mocking laughter.

Mrs. Bennett repeated her warning several times during the evening, as, in the intervals of unpacking and settling down, Benedicta’s mind kept reverting to her hopes for the next day.

‘Benney dear, I don’t want you to be disappointed. It’s very unlikely you’ll see anybody at this Abbey.’

‘I’m sure we shall. Now that we’ve found our mystery girl again I know we’re going to get to know her.’

‘You’ll have to keep an eye on young Ben, Mother,’ said Jim. ‘If she doesn’t see her girl anywhere about, she’ll bolt away through the grounds to the house and stand gazing at the windows, and they’ll come out and ask if she’s escaped from a loony home.’

‘If they do, I shall see them,’ Benney retorted. ‘If they don’t I could have a fit or an accident on the doorstep and be carried inside the house for treatment.’

‘I’m beginning to be sorry you suggested the trip, Jim,’ said Mrs. Bennett.

‘I’m beginning to think I won’t go.’

‘Oh, Jim! We can’t drive; we must have you! I was only fooling,’ Benney cried. ‘I shall be very quiet and shy when we get there! You know you want to go; you’d like to see her yourself!’

‘Yes, I daresay. But I’m not going on like a maniac if I don’t happen to see her.’

‘I won’t!’ Benney promised. ‘I won’t be an idiot. But I am hoping something jolly will happen. And so are you, and so is Mother. I own up to it, that’s all.’

‘You make more noise about it, anyway,’ her mother agreed.

Benney curbed her excitement, lest Jim should repeat his threat. But there was determination in her eyes as they set out next morning. Surely somehow, somewhere, they would see their daffodil girl before they came home again!

They picknicked in a brown beech-wood in Buckinghamshire, where grey smooth stems made aisles above a carpet of red leaves. Benedicta gathered primroses and violets in a lane, and hailed them as a good omen.

Mrs. Bennett had chosen their route, and presently she asked Jim to stop the car, and bade Benney walk with her across a hillside to a great white splash of chalk on the green turf. A wide view of flat country lay below them, stretching away as far as they could see, and Jim, following them, pointed out the direction in which the ruined Abbey must lie.

‘I came here once as a girl,’ said his mother. ‘But I never went over on that side. Benedicta, do you know you’re standing on a cross?’

‘A cross, Mother? How do you mean?’

‘My aunt, so it is!’ Jim exclaimed. ‘Cut in the turf, Ben; don’t you see?’

‘All this white stuff? I believe it is a cross, but I’d never have guessed, if you hadn’t told me,’ Benney cried.

‘You’ll see it better when we’re farther off. I wanted you to be able to say you had stood beside it. Come along back to the car; we’ll look up at the cross presently. There’s another, a smaller one, on the opposite hill.’

‘It is a beauty!’ Benney exclaimed, as she gazed up at the white cross from the road below the hill. ‘You must see it for miles! I’m glad we went up there.’

‘I’m glad to have seen it again,’ Mrs. Bennett agreed.

‘And now for this old Abbey! And—perhaps—you never know!’ Benney hinted.

Through tree-hung lanes they came to the foot of the hills, just within the borders of Oxfordshire. ‘Topping country!’ said Jim. ‘Those old monk chaps knew what they were about.’

‘They always did,’ said his mother. ‘Remember Tintern, and Fountains! They always chose the most lovely valleys for their monasteries.’

Benedicta had nothing to say. Excitement had driven her to silence, but she was taking in everything, her eyes roving over the beautiful trees and the primrose-studded banks bordering the lane.

She gave a little cry. 'Jim! Oh, the Abbey! Oh, Jim, stop!'

In a meadow, framed in big trees, stood a group of grey buildings, with wide arches and a row of narrow lancet windows showing above a protecting wall. There was a door in the wall, and a path led straight to it from an old stone bridge, which crossed the stream running beside the road.

'Looks all right.' Jim shut off his engine. 'Do we leave the car here?'

'This will be the monks' fish-stream,' said Mrs. Bennett. 'There's a gate farther on and a drive leading to that little door, Jim. You'd better take the car in.'

'Let me get out first!' and Benney opened the door and sprang out. 'I want to go by the path and the monks' bridge.'

'We'll join you at the door in the wall,' said her mother.

Benney crossed the bridge, pausing to look over the parapet of moss-covered stones down into the clear, bubbling stream. Then she wandered dreamily along the path, and stood gazing through a little gate under an old archway. Within was a smooth green lawn, small and enclosed by grey walls; directly opposite was a beautiful arched doorway, with a little pointed window on each side.

'Look, Mother! It's beautiful!' she turned eagerly, as the car drove up.

'You missed a lovely old gate-house by taking the short cut, Benney. You must see it on our way out,' said Mrs. Bennett.

In answer to Jim's ring, an elderly woman appeared, leaning heavily on a stick. She opened the gate and asked them to wait a moment.

'Someone will come,' she said.

'A beastly caretaker,' Benney whispered. 'I wish they'd let us wander round by ourselves. I'd a million times rather!'

'But you wouldn't understand it,' Mrs. Bennett assured her. 'It's better to have it explained by somebody who knows.'

'If you will come this way——' said a rich, unmistakable voice behind them.

'Oh, it's you yourself!' Benedicta's astounded cry of delight rang out, as she turned and found herself facing Madalena di Ravarati.

CHAPTER IV

MAIDLIN UNDERSTANDS

‘Oh, it is the one chance in a thousand!’ Benney gasped.

The Italian girl grew scarlet. Then, suddenly, recognition dawned in her eyes. ‘But I’ve seen you before! Where was it?’ She looked quickly at all three, and then her gaze rested on Mrs. Bennett. ‘I half know you. Where have we met?’

‘You said you’d know Mother again!’ Benney shouted in excitement. ‘It was in Annecy—you forgot our order and came to ask—you wore a daffodil and a little apron—a man was rude and you threw soup over him!’

Madalena’s face cleared in relief. ‘I remember. I knew I had seen you before! I didn’t throw the soup; it just happened. How odd to see you again! You were kind and understanding; I knew I wouldn’t forget you.’

‘Not so odd,’ Mrs. Bennett said, smiling. ‘We heard you sing, and we recognised you. You gave us a great treat.’

‘Oh! Were you at the concert?’ she flushed again. ‘I *was* so frightened!’

‘Were you? You didn’t show it.’

‘Mother and I were there,’ Benney said eagerly. ‘We thought your songs were gorgeous! Wasn’t Sir Ivor Quellyn pleased? Mother thought he wasn’t, quite, but we didn’t know why.’

‘He wants me to sing in grand opera, but I can’t act, and I don’t want to do it. He says I have the voice but not the temperament. I can’t help it; I’m not an actress.’

‘No, I don’t think it would suit you,’ Mrs. Bennett agreed.

‘I’d like to wear the marvellous frocks and costumes,’ the Italian girl admitted, with laughing black eyes. ‘But I wouldn’t like any of the rest of it. It isn’t the sort of life I’d care for. Ivor can’t have his own way in everything!’

‘He expects it, doesn’t he? He looks like that,’ said Benney.

‘Benedicta!’ said her mother.

‘I loved your ballad!’ Benney went on eagerly. ‘I’m afraid I didn’t hear much of the first thing. I was so stunned by seeing you again.’

‘The ballad was my choice. Ivor said I might choose my encore, if I’d sing the Handel aria to please him. I said I might not need an encore, and he laughed at me. So I prepared “Sylvy” in case it was wanted. I love the little tune!’

‘Did he like your choice?’ asked Mrs. Bennett. ‘I thought it suited you so well.’

‘He laughed,’ Maidlin confessed. ‘He always laughs at us for being so keen on folk-music. But he said it would suit me and be a good contrast to the other. Did you come to see the Abbey? Shall I take you round?’

‘We came to see you, but we didn’t really expect it to happen,’ Benney explained. ‘We heard about the ruins and we thought, if we came, just possibly——’

‘And it has happened. No wonder you shrieked! We’d better begin going round; other people may come, and Auntie will wonder why we’re standing here. It was my aunt who let you in,’ Madalena said simply. ‘I’m helping her, just for a day or two. She isn’t strong, and when she has faint turns the steps are too much for her. On her bad days I come to help.’

‘You are mysterious!’ Benney marvelled. ‘You’ve been a waitress, and a public singer, and now you’re a caretaker and a guide! How many more things are you?’

‘I’m aunty to two lively twins, and that’s a whole-time job. And next week I’m going to be bridesmaid to a Countess.’ The black eyes gleamed with amusement.

‘Oh! The girl who was at the concert? Are you her bridesmaid?’

‘One of them. The twins are maids too, and Rosamund’s cousins. I couldn’t let her be married without me; we’ve been chums since I was fourteen. Will you come this way?’ and she led them out on to the green lawn, surrounded by grey walls and arched doorways and windows.

She was slight and small, with black hair coiled on her neck, and clear pale skin. She wore a dress of very deep-blue wool, woven on a white silk warp, so that the blue was shot with silver and looked bright, not dark, changing and shimmering as she moved, but it was very simply made, its beauty in the material itself and in the vivid bands of pattern, in orange and green and yellow, which decorated the skirt.

‘This is the cloister garth; the monks’ burial place. You can see almost the whole Abbey from here. On the south side, those high windows are the refectory; we’ll go up there first. This beautiful Early English doorway and the lovely little windows belong to the chapter-house. The church has gone, but it was through that gap. The monks slept in the dormitory over the chapter-house and day-room; those lancets are the dormitory windows. This is all that is left of the cloisters, which once went right round the garth, of course. The kitchens and store-rooms are below the refectory. As you can see by the windows, it was built much later than the rest; I’ll show you the site of the first refectory outside. Shall we go up? It’s a beautiful big hall. These are the stairs; be careful how you go.’

She led the way up a stone stair under a vaulted roof to the lovely hall, and pointed out the tiles and wall-paintings, the reader's niche and the big fireplace, and the beautiful carved beams of the roof.

Mrs. Bennett was deeply interested and asked many questions. Benney listened with half her mind, but kept glancing at Jim, who was hanging back in obvious embarrassment. He could not forget that meeting of two years before and his own incautious comment on the supposed foreign waitress's appearance. 'Topping kid! Ripping eyes!'—was that what he had said? And his father's remark, 'A pretty little thing.' And she had been English and had understood. She must have laughed at him many times since, and Jim could not bear to be laughed at. In her presence he was stricken with shyness, and kept awkwardly in the background.

He was puzzled, too. What was she? Waitress—caretaker—singer—intimate friend of the Quellyns—he did not know what to make of her. Was she perhaps a village girl whose voice Lady Quellyn had discovered and had trained? She had said that the caretaker of the ruins was her aunt. But where did her Italian name and her foreign appearance come from? Jim would have liked to put a few very personal questions to this mysterious girl.

She knew the Abbey thoroughly and loved it, that was certain. No question of Mrs. Bennett's found her unprepared, and she explained the life of the monks in a simple but picturesque way that captured Benedicta's imagination and held her enthralled.

'Were they Benedictines? Oh, I do hope they were!'

'No, they were Cistercians. Why do you want them to be Benedictines?'

'Because my name's Benedicta. I've a godfather in Rome, and he said I was to be blessed and to be a blessing to myself and everybody, and they called me Benedicta. But I'm not, you know; not yet. So they usually call me Benney or just Ben. May we call you Madalena? We feel we've known you for two years; must we say Miss di Ravarati?'

The black eyes laughed at her. 'Madalena is too long for every day; it's only for use on programmes. I'm Maidlin, or Maid for short.'

'Oh, how pretty! Oh, let us call you Maidlin!'

Maidlin laughed. 'Come and see the day-room, where the monks worked. Then we'll go up to the dormitory.'

'How did it feel to have all those thousands of people cheering and clapping for you?' Benney asked eagerly.

'Very nice, but a little alarming! I did it to please Ivor and Joy; Joy has been so good to me, and has taken so much trouble over my training. I felt this would show it had been some use, if I did well; she wanted me to try.'

'Joy?' Benney queried.

'Lady Quellyn, you know.'

‘Oh, I see. Wasn’t she fearfully pleased?’

‘I think she was,’ Maidlin admitted. ‘But I don’t want to do it often,’ and she led them down a dark passage and into a big, light room, where the monks had worked.

‘That’s the way to the Hall, where we live,’ she said, as they came out to the garth after visiting the site of the old refectory. ‘There’s a path across the Abbot’s garden and through the shrubbery to the Hall. We come into the Abbey a great deal.’

‘You know all about it, don’t you?’ Benney said admiringly.

‘I’ve lived here for ten years.’

‘Where did you live before that? With your aunt?’

‘Benney!’ said her mother.

‘I suppose it isn’t my business. I’m sorry.’

Maidlin explained. ‘I lived on a farm in Cumberland, on the fells, with another aunt. I’m half North-Country; Ivor says that’s why I’m so hopeless when it comes to acting. He says I’m cold and stiff, and all sorts of dreadful things.’

‘Oh, not stiff!’ Mrs. Bennett protested. ‘Who taught you that beautiful curtsy? We all remarked on it.’

Maidlin’s eyes widened. ‘Was it all right? I didn’t know; I just did it.’

‘I liked the way you bobbed to Lady Quellyn, after you’d sung her songs,’ said Benney. ‘It looked like a country-dance curtsy.’

‘It was,’ Maidlin said simply. ‘Rosamund says they laughed and said: “Good for Maid!” We’re all dancers here. I suppose you didn’t hear Margaret shriek—“Go it, Auntie Maid! Don’t be frightened!”—when I first came on? I heard and it made me laugh, and I think it helped.’

‘Was that one of the twins? We heard her call something, but we didn’t know what it was.’

‘Nobody can subdue Margaret for very long. They were surprisingly good, but they knew they’d be whisked out into the corridor by Rosamund, if they didn’t behave well. Come up to the dormitory; be careful of these steps! They’re uneven in places.’

She gave her left hand to Mrs. Bennett, to lead her up the turning stair.

A cry of incredulous joy broke from Benedicta. ‘Oh, your ring! Camp Fire! Oh, how many other lovely things do you do?’

In the big, light upper room Maidlin turned eager eyes upon her. ‘Are you Camp Fire? I’ve been a Guardian for nearly four years; we’ve a very jolly Camp Fire—Camp Waditaka, the Camp of the Adventurous People.’

‘How thrilling! I’ve had the most dreadful luck!’ Benney mourned. ‘They started a Camp Fire at school last term, and I joined—see, here’s my ring, the same as yours! But I left at the end of the term—that was yesterday

—so though I am and always will be Camp Fire, I haven't had much good of it. I'm hoping I'll find another Camp somewhere and be able to go on. I haven't got a gown, of course; I'm not a Wood-Gatherer. I suppose you've a marvellous gown?

Maidlin coloured. 'It is rather marvellous.' She hesitated. 'I could show it to you before you go; I was working on it when you came. We've a meeting to-night, a rather important meeting.'

'Oh, please show it to us! Mother has never seen a gown!' Benney cried. 'Where is it? Where were you working?'

'In my aunt's room. She lives in some funny little rooms right in the walls of the Abbey.'

'May we see them? And the gown? Or is that asking too much?' said Mrs. Bennett. 'And if it isn't rude—and since we're such old friends!—may I admire the frock you're wearing? It's most beautiful material.'

'It's handwoven,' Maidlin's face lit up in eager pleasure. 'Rosamund has a loom, and she wove it specially for me. She wanted me to have a gorgeous white silk one for the concert, but I said I'd much rather have something simple for singing and a useful handwoven that I could wear every day. Isn't the pattern pretty? I like to feel there isn't another piece anywhere in the world exactly the same as mine.'

'Oh, marvellous!' Benney cried. 'You must be terribly proud of it!'

'I am, just terribly proud,' Maidlin confessed, laughing.

She had glanced occasionally at silent, embarrassed Jim. As he went with Mrs. Bennett to look out of the gap in the wall which had once led to the "night-stair" down to the church, Maidlin looked doubtfully at Benedicta.

Benney read the unspoken question correctly. 'He's frightened of you,' she whispered.

Maidlin's eyes widened. 'But why?' she whispered in reply.

'Because he said things about you, that day in Annecy, and we all laughed when you said you were English. He feels he made an ass of himself, and he hates that.'

'I'm sorry,' Maidlin looked troubled; this was something she understood. She gazed sympathetically at Jim's back; then she went quickly to explain where the church and the high altar had stood and how the monks had watched the light burning all night long.

For the moment she ignored Jim; but she was shy herself, now that she understood, and she stumbled in her explanation and could not quite forget herself as she had done at first, even in her story of the Abbey. In the chapter-house she turned to him, with a kind of desperate courage.

‘Will you please stop worrying? You didn’t say anything that mattered; and anyway, I’ve forgotten all about it. It’s dreadful to have you following us round, not saying a word! Don’t you like the Abbey?’

‘Good for you! Give him another!’ Benney cried in delight.

Jim looked open-mouthed at Maidlin. Then he jerked—‘Sorry!’

‘Then that’s all right. You’ve said you’re sorry, and I’ve told you I’ve forgotten the whole thing. Please don’t think about it again, ever. I’m going to ask you to do something for us. I suppose you drive the car? I heard a car, so I know you came in one.’

‘Yes?’ Jim asked, much astonished. ‘I drive; what can I do?’

‘If I invite your sister to stay and watch our Camp Fire meeting, will you come back and fetch her about nine o’clock?’

‘Oh, Madalena di Ravarati! What a perfectly marvellous idea! Oh, you’re a wonder! How did you understand?’ Benney shouted.

‘It’s the right thing to do for another Camp Fire Girl. We’re going to have a particularly jolly meeting, and it’s at half-past six; the Abbey closes at six. We’re meeting here, in the ruins,’ Maidlin explained. ‘We’ve never done it before; we meet in the Village Hall in winter and in the woods in summer. To-night we’re meeting in the Abbey; we’ve asked leave, and Joan—Mrs. Raymond, the owner of the Abbey—has said we may do it. If you’d like to stay, you could easily get home afterwards. I suppose you come from town?’

‘Oh, easily! Oh, Mother, will you let me stay? Jim, could you come back? Were you going anywhere to-night? It’s the first day of the holidays! For a very special treat, Mother!’

Mrs. Bennett and Jim were looking doubtful. ‘You don’t want the kid on your hands all that time. It’s only half-past three,’ Jim began.

‘I have to go out to dinner to-night,’ Mrs. Bennett said. ‘I ought to be getting home soon. I was going to leave Benney alone at home.’

‘Oh, that settles it!’ Maidlin exclaimed. ‘Leave her with me, and let her brother fetch her. She can’t have had many Council Fires yet.’

‘Only two, and the last one when I had my ring.’ Benney was tremulous with eagerness. ‘I took my name; I’m Ohitaya, “to be brave.” Oh, Mother darling, let me stay!’

‘You ought to belong to Camp Waditaka; we’re the Brave or Adventurous People. Will you let her stay?’ Maidlin looked at Mrs. Bennett.

‘Mother, I simply must! Jim doesn’t mind coming back; do you, Jimmy? What’s your Camp Fire name, Maidlin?’

‘Nawadaha, the Singer.’

‘Oh, yes! The Sweet Singer, out of *Hiawatha*!’

‘I call it just “The Singer”, you know.’ Maidlin coloured and laughed.

‘It’s far too good of you,’ Mrs. Bennett began. ‘It would be a very great treat to Benedicta.’

‘Then you’ll let her stay. That’s all right! We shall have finished by nine,’ Maidlin looked at Jim.

‘I’ll turn up about nine,’ he promised.

‘Don’t let us down and leave me on her hands for the night! I’d love it, if you did, but it wouldn’t be——’

‘Don’t be an ass, Ben!’ said Jim. ‘I’ll be here prompt at nine.’

‘We really ought to go, I’m afraid,’ Mrs. Bennett began.

‘You must see the sacristy; there’s a fine rose window—round this way. And here is the site of the great church, with the bases of the pillars still remaining. Do you want to see the crypt? It’s rather wonderful; the oldest part of the Abbey, of course, with Saxon pillars, and the tomb of the first Abbot, Michael, whose figure you saw on the gate-house.’

‘Benney hasn’t seen the gate-house yet; she came by a bridge and a path across the field.’

Maidlin nodded. ‘I’ll show it to her. Here is the rose window. After this, we’ll go underground.’

CHAPTER V

THE CAMP FIRE ON THE GARTH

The car rolled away, and Maidlin and Benney turned back from the gate-house.

‘I hope nobody else will come!’ Benney sighed happily. ‘It’s so marvellous of you to have asked me!’

‘We often have nobody at all. If anyone comes, you can slip into Aunty’s little room, where we’ll have tea presently. I hope we’re not interrupted; I want to finish my gown before the meeting.’

Maidlin sat on a cushion on a broken stone step and spread out a gorgeous robe of yellow cloth, ornamented with brown leather fringe and bands of soft leather for collar and decoration. While Benedicta exclaimed and admired, she told the meaning of the various symbols, and worked with coloured silks from a basket at her side.

‘I’m finishing these wavy lines, which stand for music and song. They all soar upwards—you see? I left the last ones unfinished until I’d have sung in public for Ivor; it was to have been last autumn, but when he arranged his programmes it seemed better to leave me till the spring. There were other people who had to be put in the concerts, and I was glad enough to wait. Now that I’ve done it, it’s time to finish the song part of my gown.’

Benedicta agreed, deeply fascinated. ‘Are you a Torch-Bearer?’

Maidlin coloured. ‘To-night,’ she confessed. ‘That’s why I said it was a special meeting. They think I’ve qualified, both in Music and as a leader of the Camp Fire, so I’m to have my silver pin. Maribel Marchwood is coming, to give it to me; I asked her to come, as she was the one who started our Camp and gave me the first torch to light our Fire. That’s why the meeting is so early; we usually have it after dark. Maribel lives in town, and she has a baby girl, nearly a year old—Marigold. Mike—that’s Marigold’s father—will drive Maribel down, but she has to get back to Baby; she’ll only stay for a few minutes.’

‘How thrilled your girls will be!’

‘They want to be Torch-Bearers themselves, so they’re pleased for me to lead the way,’ Maidlin said, laughing. ‘Now, Benedicta, we’ll ask Aunty for our tea. Did you say you had a picnic lunch in the woods? Then a boiled egg for you! And I shall have no dinner, only a very late supper, so one for me too, I think.’

The little old rooms in the wall fascinated Benney. She saw where Lady Quellyn had lived as a girl and where Maidlin had slept on the night when the twins were born.

‘Don’t any of them come into the Abbey to see you, when you’re caretaking?’ she asked.

‘The difficulty is to keep Elizabeth and Margaret away; they want to be here to help. But there’s nobody at home to-day. Joy—Lady Quellyn, you know—has gone with Ivor to Manchester; she has always wanted to go to a concert in the Free Trade Hall. The twins are at the Manor with their cousins; the Manor is next door to the Hall, and Sir Kenneth Marchwood is the twins’ uncle. There are four children, three of them boys, and our girls are as much at home there as at the Hall. So if Joy wants to go with Ivor for a night, she parks the twins with Jen—she’s Lady Marchwood, of the Manor.’

‘And do you go too?’

‘Sometimes. To-night I shall stay at home, as Rosamund is with us. She’ll be in town till late; she had to meet Geoffrey—he’s the Earl—and she’s fearfully busy with dressmakers and so on; but she’s living with us until she’s married next week. So there’s no one at home to-day. Mary—I haven’t told you about her yet; she writes books—is there, but she’s working hard just now. She has off spells and working spells, and this is a busy time, with proofs of next autumn’s book.’

‘I’d love to see her,’ Benney said wistfully. ‘Won’t she come to your meeting?’

Maidlin coloured. ‘I invited her. She may come.’

The possibility added to Benney’s excitement, as she waited alone for the Council Fire to be lighted. By Maidlin’s suggestion she sat perched on the broken stone railing which enclosed the remains of the cloisters, raised a couple of feet above the grass of the garth, from which she could overlook all that happened.

A murmur of voices and gleams of yellow and brown and flame told her that the girls, in their gowns, were gathering in the archway by which she herself had arrived. From the door of the little private room came Maidlin, transformed into a high priestess, with richly-decorated yellow robe, hanging fringe and chains of coloured beads, her thick hair plaited and falling in long black braids on each side of her face. She went quietly to the centre of the garth and knelt to build a safe foundation for the fire, laying a triangular sheet of metal on three brick pillars, so that it was raised well above the grass.

‘We’re not going to leave a burnt patch in the middle of the garth!’ she had said, earlier in the afternoon.

Her headband, tied across her forehead, was of glittering gold and silver beads, woven on the small loom. The coloured waving lines of music and song, rising from her hem, were at last complete. On her bare arm was the silver bracelet of the Fire-Maker.

She stood and gave the low *Wohelo* call, and the girls came quietly out, a long procession of fifteen all wearing gowns, though some of these were undecorated. Each raised her right arm in turn, giving the Sign of Fire, and the Guardian responded with a greeting to each. Several of the first-comers slipped away, while the rest were still arriving, and came back with their arms full of wood, which had been stacked in the corner of the cloisters, almost out of sight. They glanced at Benedicta, as they gathered it in their arms, but they did not speak to her.

Three Fire-Makers came last in the line, carrying unlit candles in wooden holders. They placed these in the corners of the metal tray, when they had greeted the Guardian, and knelt to arrange the twigs and sticks, which the Wood-Gatherers had brought.

The Guardian raised the notes of a chant, and the circle stood to sing around the unlit fire. Then Maidlin handed one of the tall candles to the leading Fire-Maker, a girl with flaming red hair, worn in two thick plaits and bound down by a green band, and she carried it away into the little room in the wall. She came back in a moment with the candle lighted, shielding the flame with her hand, and set it in its place, kneeling and reciting a verse, claiming it as ‘The Light of Work.’ Maidlin lit a long taper and handed it in turn to the other Fire-Makers, who knelt and lit their candles for Health and Love. Then the Guardian lit the little fire, and after a moment of suspense the circle began to sing, seeing that it was burning safely.

Maidlin, kneeling still, recited a verse—‘Kneel always when you light a fire.’ The Fire Song, with its actions, followed, and then the girls put down the leather cushions, stencilled with their personal symbols, which they carried, and sat in a ring round the fire. A Wood-Gatherer read the Count of the last meeting; then, clearly across the silent garth, came Maidlin’s voice.

‘Camp Fire Sisters, a friend came to-day to see the Abbey. I found she was a Camp Fire Girl and wore a ring. I have asked her to watch our Council Fire. Shall we welcome her into our circle, or must she watch from far off?’

‘Oh, let her come in, Guardian!’ There was a hospitable chorus.

The red-haired Fire-Maker came to Benedicta, who stood, shy and eager, in her corner. ‘Won’t you come to the fire? We wondered who you were. Have you a Camp Fire name?’

‘It’s terribly nice of you all! I’m Ohitaya, “to be brave”, but my real name is Benedicta Bennett.’

‘She didn’t need an Indian name, did she? She could have used her own and called herself “Blessing”,’ Maidlin said, making room for Benney beside her.

‘I expect she wanted a ceremonial name,’ said the Fire-Maker. ‘I’m Wopida, The Grateful One, because everybody’s been so jolly good to me. Outside Camp Fire I’m Cecily.’

‘It’s simply marvellous to be here!’ Benney said happily.

‘Look!’ The Grateful One laid a hand on her knee.

Maidlin had risen in her place. From the old archway which led to the Hall came a stranger—a tall girl in a beautifully-decorated gown, with long yellow plaits framing her face and hanging over her breast. She held a lighted torch above her head and the light twinkled on the beads of her dark blue and white headband.

‘Young Mrs. Marchwood,’ Cecily whispered. ‘She helped us to start, four years ago. I was at that meeting, when she gave Maidlin the torch to light our first fire.’

‘She doesn’t look like a “Mrs.” to-night,’ Benney murmured.

‘She’s only a little older than Maidlin, but she has the loveliest baby girl. We’ve seen Marigold.’

Then they were silent, as Maribel Marchwood, a Torch-Bearer since her school days in Camp Keema, drew near, and the circle, standing now, parted to let her come to the fire.

‘Nawadaha, Singer, Guardian of the Fire, I bring you our highest rank. You have been Guide to your younger sisters for four years; you have sung to little country groups, and to thousands in London; you have used your gift to help all who sought your aid, and you have taught music and song to others. You are now the first Torch-Bearer of Camp Waditaka.

‘I hand the torch to you;
O bear it firm and true!
That every younger Camp Fire Girl
May look for light to you!’

She handed the blazing torch to Maidlin, and pinned a round silver brooch on the breast of her gown.

Maidlin held the torch aloft.

‘“That light which has been given to me I desire to pass undimmed to others.” And now, if you don’t mind, Stormy Waves——!’ and she hastily dropped the torch into the fire before it burned her fingers.

‘I hoped it would just last out!’ Maribel said, laughing.

‘Thank you so much for coming! Girls, sing a cheer for Stormy Waves!’

‘Camp Waditaka,’ said Maribel Marchwood, ‘you’re a jolly lucky Camp Fire. I heard your Guardian sing in London, and I can tell you all the thousands of people liked her very much. Ask her to give you one of the songs she sang at the big concert! There was one that needed no accompaniment, and it was very delightful. Now you must excuse me. I have to hurry back to Marigold and Mike.’

She passed through the circle and walked, very stately in her swaying robe and beads, to the dark passage and disappeared under the pointed archway, followed by a storm of cheers. Maidlin ran after her to say another word of thanks and farewell, and Cecily, the red-haired Fire-Maker, caught up a pipe that hung round her neck by a leather thong, and began to play ‘Sellenger’s Round.’

The girls took hands eagerly and danced in a big ring round the fire. Maidlin made her way carefully through the maze, as they ‘armed’ in couples, and stood beside the fire, with a smile for Benney.

‘I know it. Can’t I join in?’ Benney pleaded.

‘There’s no partner for you, and anyway, here’s the end,’ as the ring swung round again. ‘Next time you and I will dance together. They’ll want me to sing, after what Stormy Waves said, so I mustn’t dance before that. Think of singing just after “Sellenger’s Round”!’

Benney laughed. ‘You couldn’t. But I’d love to dance with you.’

‘We shan’t dance much, because our gowns are so heavy. The beadwork and the leather collars weigh them down. But we’ll have one dance for you. Isn’t Cecil’s playing perfect? She’s a real musician; a born accompanist.’

‘Sing to us, Nawadaha!’ cried Camp Waditaka.

‘Sit down, then, and I’ll sing you the story I sang to them in London,’ and Maidlin stood by the fire and sang the ballad of Silvy, The Female Highwayman.

‘I only did it for to know
Whether you were a man or no.’

The beautiful deep voice died away, and the girls sat in silence. Cecily Perowne broke it, as Maidlin stood gazing into the fire.

‘Lead us in “Mammy Moon”, Guardian. The fire’s going down.’

Maidlin sat beside the fire and sang very softly, and the circle took up the chorus. Then she called to Cecily. ‘One more dance, Gratitude, so that our visitor can join in with me. Play us “The Irish Washerwoman”, and we’ll dance Circassian Circle round the fire.’

‘We choose round dances, because of the fire,’ she explained to Benney, as they danced together.

The sun had set and the last glow was fading, leaving the garth in deep shadow. The Fire-Makers had made up the fire before the second dance began, and the light shone on the arches of the chapter-house but left the high windows of the refectory dark.

‘Isn’t it mysterious, with those black shadows under all the arches?’ Benney murmured, as she skipped round with her partner in the promenade. ‘I say! How beautifully you dance! I feel like a sack of potatoes!’

‘I’ve had ten years of dancing. Yes, isn’t the garth wonderful to-night? I’ve often longed for a Council Fire here.’

‘Ought we to dance, if it was once a burial ground?’

Maidlin laughed. ‘It’s not the first time. Joan did it herself, so she wouldn’t mind. The Abbey is hers, not ours; we only take care of it for her, now that she’s married. She’s going to leave the Abbey in her will to her eldest little girl, Jansy—Janice Raymond, the twins’ cousin. They’re well off for cousins. Now we’ll sit round the fire and eat cakes and talk; the Camp will want to know how I felt on Wednesday night. I shall have to tell them how frightened I was.’

‘Then, please, may I say that I was there and you didn’t show it a scrap?’

‘If you like. You can tell your story of the great occasion! I’m sure Camp Waditaka would be pleased.’

‘I’d like to.’ Benney was nervous of the crowd of girls at first, but she soon lost her shyness and gave a description of the concert that delighted the Camp and drew a laughing protest from Maidlin.

‘I’m sure I didn’t look as calm and beautiful as all that, Benedicta-Ohitaya! I felt like jelly inside. Rosamund had stayed with me till the last minute, to keep me talking, all about nothing, so that I’d have no time to think. I’m never nervous once I begin to sing, but I don’t like the time beforehand. I never heard a note of “Figaro”, and I do love it! I was wondering whether I was going to be sick.’

The girls laughed in sympathy. ‘I suppose everybody was there?’ one girl asked. ‘Did Lady Marchwood and Sir Kenneth go?’

A shadow fell on Maidlin’s face. ‘It was dreadful. They went, but they didn’t hear me sing. I only heard about it afterwards; they were sitting in the stalls and I couldn’t see them. Joy and Rosamund knew, but they didn’t tell me till we were halfway home. I asked if they thought Jen—that’s Lady Marchwood, our very best friend, Benney—had liked it, and they had to tell me. She and Kenneth were fetched out just before the overture began, because Rosemary had been taken ill, and they had to race home as fast as Kenneth could drive. She’s a little better, but she’s still in bed, and they’re very worried about her; she isn’t as strong as the boys.’

‘So they didn’t hear you sing? Oh, what bad luck!’

‘That didn’t matter; they had to go to Rosemary. Jen was upset about missing my songs; she apologised to me next morning, but that was silly and I told her so. It was a good thing they were able to go home so quickly. But Jen says she’ll always be sorry she missed my first London concert; and of course I’m sorry too. Rosemary’s only three, and she’s had two bad times with croup; they’re always anxious when she’s poorly. Now that’s enough about my concert! Grateful One, tell the Camp Fire your news; you only arrived from Switzerland two days ago. How is your mother?’

‘Very well just now,’ and Cecily began to tell of her latest doings in the mountain village where her mother lived.

The meeting closed when darkness had fallen, with a quiet song around the dying fire. The candles were put out with due ceremonial, the Guardian said a few low words of blessing and farewell, a ritual chant was sung almost in a whisper, and the girls stole away in silence, with the Fire sign given by each and answered by Maidlin.

In the Abbey entrance there was subdued talk as they put on their shoes and coats and caps, but all were hushed by the solemnity of the benediction, and no one laughed or shouted.

Maidlin sank down on her cushion to rest. ‘Just a minute or two, Benedicta! Then I’ll go and dress, and we’ll ask Aunty to give you some supper before your brother comes. It’s nearly time, but you’ll be able to have a cup of cocoa and biscuits. I must have mine with Rosamund; she’ll be home now and she was going to wait.’

Cecily Perowne came running across the garth, her face troubled. ‘Maidlin, somebody wants you. He’s there, at the gate—I think there’s something wrong.’

‘Oh, but I can’t go like this! Who is it, Cecil?’

‘I don’t know; a man—a boy. He asked for you—he’s in a hurry, and he’s upset.’

Maidlin stood, uncertain what to do. Then in the dimly-lit archway she saw Jimmy Bennett’s face, and at what she read in it she forgot herself and ran to meet him. He was very white and his eyes were tortured by fear.

‘Oh, what is it?’ she laid her hand on his arm. ‘What has happened? Has there been an accident?’

‘Mother,’ he said unsteadily. ‘I’ll have to tell Ben.’

‘Come in here!’ Maidlin grew as white as he. She pushed him into her aunt’s little room, and closed the door.

CHAPTER VI

MAIDLIN HELPS

Cecily took command of the situation out in the cloisters. 'Girls, let's go quickly. Something has happened. They won't want to find us still here.'

As the girls crossed the little bridge in silence, she paused. 'He said: "I'll have to tell Ben." He must belong to Benedicta. I shall go back and talk to her, to keep her from worrying; Maidlin may say she'd better not be told. She hasn't guessed; she didn't see him; she was looking at the Torch-Bearer pin. Good night, all!' and she ran back through the cloisters and out to join Benney on the garth.

'Jolly meeting, wasn't it?' she said casually. 'Maidlin has to attend to somebody, but she'll be back soon. Tell me about your Camp Fire! Where was it? How long have you belonged?'

In the lamplight of the little room Maidlin looked up at Jim Bennett, her gown and beads and plaited hair forgotten. 'Tell me what has happened. Sit down; you look ghastly.'

'We had a smash.' Jim dropped exhausted into a chair. 'A fellow from a crossroad ran right into us. I swerved, but it was too late. It was a lorry, and we were thrown over into the hedge. It wasn't my fault!' He nearly broke down, and turned from her to hide his face in his arms on the table.

All the motherliness of Maidlin's nature rose up to help him. He seemed like a very small boy in trouble.

With her hand pressed in sympathy on his shoulder, she asked tensely, 'Your mother——? She isn't—oh, not that! Tell me, please. I'll try to help.'

'They don't know yet,' he choked. 'Her head—there's bad concussion, and some internal injury. I wasn't hurt—it seems unfair. We got her to hospital; it was near Wycombe. I 'phoned Dad, but they couldn't find him, so I got another car from a garage, and went to hunt him up. When I got home they had got on to him and he'd gone at once, so I went back. We've been at the hospital ever since. She doesn't know us.'

Maidlin stood, her lips trembling. 'That's dreadful! She is so jolly, and so kind. Oh, I do hope——! It was fearful for you,' she went on quickly. 'You've had an awful day. What are you going to do about Benney? It was splendid of you to remember her, in all that upset. But you can't take her to the hospital! Will she be all alone at home?'

'Can't be helped,' he said unsteadily. 'I'll take her somewhere. They'll ring up from the hospital if we're wanted; Dad won't leave, I know. We

thought Benney might go to an aunt at Hampstead; it would be better than being alone at home. She'll hate it; she's not keen on them, and there are no kids there; the people she likes are away from home. But it's the best we can think of.'

'At Hampstead? But didn't you say your mother was in Wycombe? It's a long way, if—if Benney had to be fetched in a hurry. Couldn't you leave her here? We're not far from Wycombe; I used to cycle to school every day. Leave Benney here, and you go back to your father. You may be able to do something to help.'

Jim raised his head and stared at her. 'But you—you wouldn't—you couldn't—would you be bothered with her? We couldn't leave her on your hands like that!'

'I'll take great care of her. She'll be all right here. I'm almost alone at home, for a night or two. Leave her with me, Jim'—the name slipped out; it would have seemed absurd to call him Mr. Bennett. 'I'm glad there's something I can do to help. Benney will be much nearer her mother here; I'll give you our 'phone numbers, both the house and the Abbey, and if you have any news you can ring up.'

'It's terribly good of you,' Jim said unsteadily. 'I don't think I ought to do it, but——'

'The question that matters'—Maidlin cut him short and went straight to the point—'is, how much are we going to tell Benney? Must she know to-night?'

Jim's lips tightened. 'You'll have to explain why she's staying here. And—and if——' he grew white again.

Maidlin nodded and stood thinking, with knitted brows. 'Yes!' she said at last. 'Benney would never forgive us if we kept it from her till morning and there was bad news. You might have to come for her during the night. She ought to be prepared.'

Jim looked at her, with terror in his eyes. 'I must tell her. I've been dreading it. Can you help me, Miss Maidlin?'

Maidlin thought quickly, with steady, desperate clearness. 'I'd offer to do it for you, but I daren't let you go away until she knows. She'll want to ask questions; she'd be terribly upset if you weren't here. We'll do it together. I'll help you all I can, but I wish there was somebody who would know better what to say.' She longed wildly for Jen or Mary or Rosamund, but it would have taken too long to fetch any of them. Jim must hurry back to the hospital.

She said quickly, 'There's the telephone. Ring up and ask if there's any later news. I'll fetch Benney. She isn't a baby; she'll have to know.'

Jim grabbed the telephone, glad to do something definite and to postpone for a moment the task he dreaded so greatly.

Maidlin, grave-eyed and pitiful, went out to the garth. Her face lit up at sight of Benney and Cecily talking together. 'Thoughtful of Cecil! I must thank her.'

The girls ran to meet her, Cecily anxious, Benney merely curious. 'Tell us, Maidlin! It isn't bad news of the little girl who is ill, is it? Rosemary, you called her?'

'No, it's bad news for you, I'm afraid, Benney.' And Maidlin's arms went round her. 'Your brother has come to tell you. The car had an accident, and your mother is in hospital. They're doing all they can for her. My dear, I am so sorry.'

'Mother!' Benney gave a wild cry. 'Is she dead?'

'No, Benney, and they're being very good to her. Your father is with her.'

'Did Jim do it?' Benney panted.

'No, it wasn't his fault. It's very hard on him. Somebody ran into them. He's terribly upset, Benney, and he's had a dreadful day. Be careful what you say to him, dear; he's as anxious and frightened as you are, and he's had all the shock of the accident, it's a wonder he was able to come to tell you; it would have been worse to hear by 'phone.'

Benney clung to her, sobbing wildly. 'When? How?'

'On their way home this afternoon. Poor Jim has been racing about finding your father and doing all he can.'

'Wasn't he hurt too?'

'Only bruised, I think; I expect the car is damaged, but he has got hold of another. Come and ask him for the latest news; I left him ringing up the hospital.'

'Where is he?' Benney brushed away her tears and ran to the doorway from which Maidlin had come. 'Jim! How did it happen? How is Mother now?'

Jim silently called down a thousand blessings on Madalena. 'She's done the job for me; what a sport!—Ben, there's no change; I've just asked for the latest news.'

'Tell me,' Benney dropped into a chair, shaking all over. 'What happened?—Oh, Jimmy, you do look bad! Were you hurt too?'

'Wish I had been!'

'That's silly,' Maidlin remarked, following them after a word of thanks and explanation to Cecily. 'As you're all right you can help everybody. Tell Benney about it and what we've arranged for her.' And she left them together and went into the little kitchen.

Her aunt had withdrawn there, to leave the room to her and Jim. ‘He looks real bad, poor boy. Would he drink a cup of tea? The kettle’s on the boil.’

‘That’s a brilliant idea, Aunt; I was just going to suggest it. It would help us all. I’ll go and dress—oh, well, I won’t trouble, if the kettle’s boiling. We mustn’t keep him here a moment longer than we can help.’ She gave a quick outline of the story to Ann Watson, who hurriedly prepared a tray.

‘Well now, isn’t that bad luck! He’s had a nasty shake, anyone can see that.’

‘It’s particularly hard lines, because he was driving. I’m going to keep Benney here for the night, Aunt. I shall take her home, as there’s only Rosamund there; but she may have to stay for a day or two, and if Joy and Ivor come back, I may bring her here to sleep in Joy’s little room. She’d prefer it to being one of a crowd at the Hall.’

‘The bed’s always ready, and I’ll see to her for you, Maidlin.’

‘I know you will. There’s so much going on in the house, with all Rosamund’s presents and preparations. Thanks, Aunt. I’ll take the tray.’

Maidlin flung back her long plaits and carried the tray to the outer room. ‘I’m once more the waitress! Forgive my costume, Jim Bennett; I didn’t waste time in changing. You’re to drink a cup of tea and eat something, both of you.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t!’ Benney half sobbed. ‘I should choke!’

‘Rubbish! You must think of your brother; he needs it badly, and I want it, but we can’t take it, if you won’t. Come, Benney, it might be much worse. Your mother isn’t dead; you can hope she’ll soon be better. Both she and Jim might have been killed; it’s a wonder he’s here at all. Now you’ve cried enough; buck up and think about other people. Have you heard our plan for you?’

‘Jim says’—Benedicta gulped down a drink of hot tea—‘it’s a perfectly marvellous idea, but I’d rather go with him, if you don’t mind. I want to be with Mother and Father.’

Jim looked helplessly at Maidlin. ‘She can’t, you know. She’ll have to go to Aunt Gertrude.’

‘I can’t! Oh, I won’t! I should die,’ Benney moaned. ‘Jim, you know how I hate her! It would be brutal to send me there just now!’

Maidlin handed a cup to Jim. ‘Drink it and don’t argue. Benney, you’ll have to choose; here, or with your aunt. It’s no use talking of going to the hospital. You’d only add to your father’s distress, and they wouldn’t let you stay.’

‘Couldn’t I go home?’ Benney sobbed.

‘You could, but I should think it would be rather lonely. Why not stay here with me? It’s much nearer to your mother.’

‘Is it?’ Benney grew quieter. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. What’s Jim going to do?’

‘Hang about to see if I’m wanted. I’ll come and fetch you if—if she’s any worse.’ Jim stumbled over the words.

‘Will you? Promise?’ And Benney turned to Maidlin with a blind instinct for comfort.

Maidlin took her in her arms. ‘Cry it out, dear. You’ll feel better. She’ll be all right with me,’ and she looked up at Jim.

He drank his tea quickly and rose. ‘I’d far rather leave her with you than with Aunt Gertrude. But—I can’t—I don’t know how to say what I feel—how to thank you for your help.’

‘Don’t waste time on it. Go back and see if you can help your father. And ring us up at any time.’

‘Yes, I’ll get along. Ben, I’ll tell Dad you’re all right. You couldn’t be in a better place. It would be awful for you at home. Good night, old girl. I’ll come in the morning.’

Maidlin sat quietly, holding Benney in her arms, till the sound of the car had died away. Then she said gently, ‘Now, Benney dear! If your Camp Fire name means anything at all to you, this is the time to prove it. Can you be brave, while I have a cup of tea? I haven’t had any yet.’

‘Oh!’ Benney sat up hurriedly. ‘Oh, I am a pig! When you’ve been so terribly kind! I never thought about you at all. Oh, I am so frightfully sorry!’

‘Don’t be sorry. I understood how you felt. But I’m hungry, and I want my tea.’

‘I’ll pour it!’ and Benedicta ran to the table. ‘Let me do something for you! How do you like it? Sugar? Milk in first? I haven’t said thank you for your marvellous idea, have I?’

‘Never mind that. I’m glad you’ve decided to stay. I want your help,’ Maidlin said with understanding wisdom, as she drank the tea. ‘I must take off my gown and put up my hair; it was dreadful of me to rush at your brother all dressed up like this, but I saw something had happened and I didn’t stop to think. I’d be so glad if you’d pull our fire to pieces while I’m changing; Aunty will give you a torch; it’s very dark out there now. Bring the underneath bricks into the cloisters and pile them in a corner where they won’t be noticed. Take the tray with the ashes to Aunty and she’ll dispose of them. Then there won’t be any traces left. It will be a real help, if you’ll do that. When I’ve changed we’ll go home and get to bed.’

Out on the silent garth Benney cleared up the remains of the Council Fire. Her hands were shaking in a way that puzzled her, and she felt oddly

tired all over.

‘I suppose it’s what they call the results of the shock,’ she thought, her lips quivering. ‘I mustn’t think, or I shall go all to pieces again, and that will worry Maidlin. I’ll try to think about her and what a sport she’s been. They’re doing absolutely everything for Mother, and Daddy and Jim are there, and Jim will ring up if there’s news. I just mustn’t think to-night.’

She stood and looked round the garth, in the light of the rising moon. The chapter-house arches and the refectory windows were in deep shadow; the silvery glow touched the broken cloister walls and gave them a weird new beauty. The silence and peace of the ancient place fell on Benney’s frightened mind like a blessing, as Maidlin had hoped.

‘It’s very lovely. I’d rather be here than anywhere. I believe Mother will be saved. Oh, God, save her life and give her back to us!’ Benney prayed.

CHAPTER VII WELCOMED BY ROSAMUND

Rosamund, coming in tired after her day in town, met Maribel Marchwood in her gown and beads crossing the lawn from the Abbey gate. They were old friends, but Rosamund had not seen Maribel as ‘Stormy Waves’, and she raised her eyebrows and laughed.

‘You are “in full dress, with all beads on”! What do I call you—Stormy Waves?’

‘Maid-Nawadaha is now a Torch-Bearer and she thoroughly deserves it. She’s been splendid with those girls. How our Cecil has improved!’ said Maribel. ‘I’m so glad she has let her hair grow. It’s such a lovely colour, and it used to be so wild when it was bobbed. She’s coming to see us to-morrow. She’s almost grown-up.’

‘Nineteen, I suppose,’ Rosamund agreed. ‘I remember the funny little Cecily I took out to find her mother for the first time.’

‘She’s very happy now. She was piping “Sellenger’s” when I left; the whistling sounded so pretty coming across the garth and through the arches! I must go and dress; Mike’s waiting for me with the car. How are your preparations going? Nearly ready for the great day?’

‘We’ll be ready when it comes. It seems a lot of unnecessary fuss, just for me to marry Geoffrey!’

‘But Geoffrey being who he is!’ Maribel remarked. ‘If you will marry an Earl you can’t expect to do it in a corner. Rosamund, do you remember what you said on the day we first met, when I brought Cecily and you recognised her likeness to her mother?’

‘What do you mean? About Cecil? Didn’t I give a shout of joy?’

‘I mean about yourself. You said you had a queer feeling that something was going to happen, and that you’d find your job; that a door would open for you and you’d go through. It has opened all right, hasn’t it?’

‘Did I say that? I didn’t dream what the door would be. Things are queer,’ Rosamund said. ‘My father’s second marriage seemed the end of everything; I didn’t know what to do; everything had gone and there was no place for me. But really it was the beginning, for Roderick was born, and that meant that I met Geoffrey, and I was swept on and on to—this! Next week I have to take up the burden of that old family title and try to do my bit for Kentisbury. It is a burden, you know. I’m weighed down by the thought of it; I’d much rather Geoffrey had been just Mr. Kane. And though the

Castle is wonderful and he's made our part of it very beautiful and very homey, it's oppressive to feel there's so much more of it. It's such a large sort of home to go to suddenly!

'You can leave the State Apartments to the public,' Maribel said, laughing. 'You must be a little bit proud of it all, Rosamund!'

'Perhaps I am. But I'm burdened by it too. And I'm taking it on three months sooner than I expected; we'd planned a June wedding, you know. But everybody was so anxious to have things settled—not only Geoffrey, but Lady Verriton, the mother of the last little Earl, who died,—that I gave in to please them. It means such a lot of rearrangement; Geoffrey and Roderick and I going to the Castle, and Lady Verriton and Rhoda moving to Verriton House. They wanted to have it all over; and then Rhoda and her mother are going to travel for a year, before Rhoda has a London season.'

'I suppose you'll present her at Court, being the head of the family?'

'I have to go to Court myself first,' Rosamund retorted. 'It will be another ordeal. I suppose I shall live through it all!'

Maribel laughed and went off to change her robes, and Rosamund went to the library to look at her letters and parcels, before going up for a bath to get rid of the feeling of town.

The telephone rang before she had dressed, and a maid tapped on her door. 'Miss Maidlin wants to speak to you, Miss Rosamund; she's in the Abbey.'

Rosamund threw on a dressing-gown and hurried to the 'phone, her hair hanging on her shoulders in a long yellow plait. 'Maid, what has happened? Aren't you coming home?'

'In ten minutes, Ros, but I want you to understand.' Maidlin spoke urgently. 'I've a kiddy here and I'm bringing her home for the night; a nice girl of fifteen called Benedicta Bennett.—Yes, isn't it a jolly name?—She came to see the Abbey, with her mother and brother, and I found that she was Camp Fire, so I asked her to stay for the evening, and her brother was to fetch her. When he came, he was in a dreadful state; the car had crashed—not his fault, but he was driving, poor boy—and the nice mother was in hospital at Wycombe.—Yes, awful, wasn't it? We had to tell Benney and she had a horrible shock.—He was going to take her to an aunt, or else to leave her alone at home. She doesn't like the aunt and she was terribly upset. So I've kept her here. It was the only thing to do, Ros.'

'Yes, I can see you'd feel that. Bring her along, Maid. I'd better be casual and natural, and not mention the accident, I suppose? Is that the idea?'

'That's what I thought. Perhaps later on Mary would talk to her. She's dying to see Mary-Dorothy.'

‘Mary’s at the Manor. Jen rang up an hour ago and asked her to come, so she left a note for me.’

‘Oh, Ros! Rosemary isn’t worse, is she?’

‘She isn’t quite so well, and Jen felt she’d have to be with her, and she couldn’t be responsible for the twinnies. You know what they are! They need one person to watch them, and they’re getting beyond Nelly Bell. But they do listen to Mary, so she had to go.’

‘Of course. Jen will like to have her there. I say, Ros, it’s not serious about Rosemary, is it? Is Jen really worried?’

‘I’m sure she’s worried. I don’t know if it’s serious, but I’m sure Ken and Jen are anxious. Come home quickly, Maid; you must be tired. I’ll be good to your little waif-and-stray. I expect she’s feeling very forlorn. Maid, I’ve some marvellous things to show you!’

‘I saw the parcels. I’m aching to know what’s inside them,’ and Maidlin rang off and went out to join Benney on the garth.

Benedicta was sober as they walked by torch-light through the Abbot’s garden and the shrubbery to the Hall. Her prayer on the garth had brought a sense of comfort, and she believed it would be answered; but she wanted to be left to herself and was not anxious to meet anybody to-night. She was disappointed, however, to hear that she would not see Mary Devine, whose books she had loved at school; and she sympathised with Maidlin’s distress over the reason.

‘I hope the little girl won’t be really ill,’ she said, when Maidlin had explained. ‘It would be dreadful for you all, with the wedding coming off next week.’

‘I can’t bear to think of it, quite apart from the wedding. It’s very hard on Jen; Rosemary is the only girl, and the boys are so strong and well.’

‘How many boys are there? Is it a big family?’

‘Three boys; Andrew is just seven, a little younger than our twins, and Tony is five and a bit. Rosemary Jane comes next, and the baby is Michael; he’s not a year old yet.’

‘Is he called after the saint in the Abbey?’

‘The first abbot. Yes, that’s where his name came from. Andrew is called for the twins’ father, Andrew Marchwood, the explorer. Tony is for Sir Antony Abinger, who left the Hall to Joy and the Abbey to Joan, because it’s through him we all come to be living here, and Jen met Kenneth, and everything happened. He was Joy’s grandfather, you know.’

‘And is there nobody at home but Miss Kane and the maids?’

‘You don’t want to meet a crowd, I know,’ Maidlin agreed. ‘There’s no one but Rosamund, Benney. She’ll show you some of her lovely presents to-morrow.’

‘Won’t I be going away to-morrow?’ Benney asked, startled.

‘I don’t know. I thought you might like to stay, as it’s so much nearer to your mother.’

‘I would like it,’ Benney whispered. ‘But if all the other people come home—Lady Quellyn, and Sir Ivor, and the children—you won’t have room, and I’d be in the way.’

‘We’d have room, but we’ll be a crowd, and you might not like it. I thought perhaps when they come you’d like to go and stay in the Abbey. You could have that little room; the bed there is always ready.’

‘Oh!’ Benney gave a cry of rapture. ‘Oh, I’d like that! And I wouldn’t be in anybody’s way! Oh, Maidlin, let me live in the Abbey!’

‘We’ll see to-morrow. I thought you’d like it.’

Rosamund met them at the door. ‘Come and give me supper! I’ve been in town all day and I’m tired. I saw “Stormy Waves”, Maid; doesn’t she look like a princess in her gown? But, all the same, your hair suits Camp Fire better than hers. Is this the girl with the wonderful name? Do they call you Benneyben at school?’

‘The girls do.’ Benney looked up at her shyly. ‘Do you mind Maidlin bringing me here? I know you’re terribly busy; you’re the bride, aren’t you?’

‘I’m going to be, next week. I’m glad to see you! I want to show off my latest treasures, and you double the size of the audience,’ Rosamund said gravely. ‘I’m used to showing my presents to an excited crowd.’

‘It would fall very flat with only Maid,’ Maidlin agreed. ‘We can wait ten minutes for supper, if you can; we’ve just had a cup of tea with Auntie. Lead us to the exhibition, Rosamund! Who are the latest contributors?’

Rosamund led the way to the library. ‘Before I forget, they want you in town on Monday. I saw your frock; it’s lovely, Maid; but they want you to try it on once more. They want the twinnies too, so I hope Joy will come home. Their little dresses are very pretty.’

‘How is yours going on? That’s what really matters.’

‘All right. Yes, Maid, it’s going to be marvellous. I feel quite bucked at the thought of appearing in it; but a little shy! It seems too showy for a village wedding.’

‘There will be reporters there,’ Maidlin assured her. ‘You can’t hope to escape that.’

‘Pig! You’re trying to make me feel bad. I don’t want to be a public character; but I won’t funk!’

‘I only want you to know how I felt on Wednesday night,’ Maidlin retorted. ‘I wish I could remember all the sensible things you said to me, before I went up on to that platform! Can’t you think of them again for yourself?’

Rosamund laughed. 'It's odd that we should both be in the news within ten days!'

'Maidlin didn't look frightened, did she? I don't believe you will, either.' Benney stole a look at Rosamund's face.

'Oh, were you there, Benneyben? She managed to hide it, didn't she? I'll try to be as clever as she was.'

'Or as brave. Are you really frightened?'

'Only a little shy,' Rosamund said, laughing. 'Now, Maid—look!'

'Oh—pictures! I was sure that big case meant pictures. Oh—Ros! Your cottage! And the Abbey! Oh, how beautiful! And how kind! Who thought of it?'

'What a marvellous idea!' Benney cried. 'Are they by the same artist? What a pretty cottage! But I like the Abbey best!'

Rosamund stood gazing at the pictures, and explained.

'The cottage is where I was living when I met Geoffrey—the Rose and Squirrel, my tea-house in Sussex. Some schoolgirls who live close to it had this painted for me; I believe it was Sonny Raymond's idea, Maid. They told Rhoda to find out who did the Abbey sketches I had already, my May Queen picture and those that were given me when I went to the Rose and Squirrel; and they wrote to Margia Lane and asked her to come and paint the cottage as their wedding-present to me. Margia took on the job, and told them she was doing a big Abbey painting for me as her own gift, and offered to send the two together. I shall hang them in my sitting-room; the two places where I've had my happiest times.'

'It's a lovely idea!' Maidlin stood gazing at the painting of the angle of the cloister garth, showing the door of the chapter-house and a glimpse of the refectory windows. 'How well Margia has managed the warm tones of that stone! It's delightful, Ros—a real treasure.'

'I'd far rather have those pictures than silver things like tea-pots, or clocks.'

'These have more meaning for you. Geoffrey can give you all the silver you want, and I'm sure the Castle has plenty of clocks.'

Rosamund laughed. 'The girls have chosen well. They're sending a photo of themselves, as they were my last country-dance class, but it isn't ready yet. Can't you almost see Roddy tumbling about the forecourt when he was learning to walk?—He's my little brother,' she explained, in answer to Benedicta's questioning look. 'My stepbrother, really, of course. Perhaps he'll be the next Earl of Kentisbury. Now I'm famishing, Maid, so shall we go and eat?'

The complete ignoring of her tragedy was good for Benney. In Rosamund's cheerful story of her day in town, those few moments of Jim's

visit seemed like a past nightmare, and she almost wondered if the blow had really fallen. But she was here, spending the night in Lady Quellyn's house. It was no ugly dream, but very tragic truth, and it lay like a shadow at the back of her mind. She could not help being interested in Rosamund's tale, however, and she had to laugh with Maidlin at the comments made to 'Madam' by the dressmaker.

'Where are you going to put Benneyben to sleep?' Rosamund asked. 'Her eyes are closing, and it's ten o'clock. I'm going to ring up the Manor and ask about Rosemary, and then I shall go to bed too.'

'I thought she could have Margaret-Twin's bed and just for to-night I'll sleep in Elizabeth's,' Maidlin said. 'The twins have two little beds in one room, Benedicta, but we very often find them both in the same one in the morning. They start the night in separate beds! You and I will do the same. If you want me in the night, you'll know I'm there. And if you don't sleep very well, to-morrow is Sunday and Ros won't wake us if we don't appear to breakfast.'

Benney looked at her, with quivering lips. How had Maidlin known she was afraid to be left alone, afraid to face the thoughts which might come? And Maid was giving up her own bed and her own pretty room, which Benney had already seen, to be company for an almost-stranger!

Benney swallowed hard and said nothing, but her look of absolute devotion set Rosamund's eyes twinkling as she went to the telephone.

'I'll come and tell you two the latest news of R.J.,' she dismissed them with a nod.

Maidlin led Benney to the big room which belonged to the twins. 'You won't find my pyjamas too big! There isn't very much of me. Get into bed; there's a dressing-gown, and slippers. I'll come presently, Benedicta.'

'Rosemary is going on fairly well,' she said, when she returned, to find Benney crouching by the window, looking at the moonlight shining on the refectory roof, just showing between the trees. 'Ros has been telling Jen about you, and about her day in town, and the pictures. Now, Benney, I want you to try to go to sleep.'

'I know I can't,' Benney whispered. 'But I'll try, since you say it. You've been so terribly kind to-day.'

And she crept into Margaret's bed and lay trying to stifle thought.

CHAPTER VIII MAIDLIN'S STORY

Maidlin sat up, shaking back her heavy black plait. She had been to sleep; the clock downstairs was striking two.

Benney was kneeling by the window again, her head buried on the sill.

Maidlin crept to her. 'Come into my bed, Benney. Pretend you're Margaret and I'm Elizabeth. Couldn't you sleep?'

'I tried,' Benney whispered brokenly. 'I lay still for hours, Maidlin; I didn't want to wake you. Then I thought if I could see the Abbey—it comforted me before, and—and I asked God to save Mother, and it made me feel better. But the moon has gone, and I couldn't see the Abbey, and it's very dark, and—and I felt sure she was dying.'

Maidlin's arms tightened round her. 'I'm glad I woke,' she thought. 'Benney! Remember your name!' she said gently. 'The brave name you've chosen, I mean. We'll talk for a little while, so that you won't be haunted like that, and then you'll go to sleep. You're tired out, you know. What shall we talk about? Shall I tell you Rosamund's story? Or all about Cecily Perowne?'

'Tell me about your mother, Maidlin!'

'My mother! Nobody asks about her; it's my father people care about. But I often think about her. She was a housemaid in a big house in London.'

'A housemaid?' Benney's head jerked up in astonishment.

'Yes; Aunt Ann Watson's little sister. You saw Aunt Ann in the Abbey. She comes from a Cumberland farm, and she was nurse to some children in a London family. My mother, who was much younger, came to be housemaid in the same family, and my father, who came from Italy and was staying in the house, fell in love with her and married her. He died when I was fifteen and his parents had died before, and their money and estates were left to the grandchildren. The grandchildren had died, and the will hadn't been altered, and I was the only one left. So when I'm twenty-five—next year—it all comes to me; but I can only use the Italian money in Italy, of course; they won't let me bring it to England and enjoy it here. I don't know what I'll do; I don't want to live in Italy altogether.'

'I didn't know you were an heiress, as well as all the rest!' Benney marvelled, completely taken out of her own troubles, as Maidlin had intended. 'But what happened to your mother, Maidlin?'

'She died; I don't know if she ever saw me.'

‘Oh! And you had to live with the aunts? Was she like you?’

Maidlin gave a little laugh. ‘No, I’m like my father. She was called Mary Damaris, and she had yellow hair.’

‘Yellow——! Oh, you’re not like her!’

‘No, but I know what she looked like, for I have a little cousin Damaris, who is called after her, and Auntie says she’s just like my mother, only my mother was prettier. I think my Damaris is quite pretty enough! She’s like her father, and he and my mother were very much alike.’

‘I can’t imagine you with a yellow-haired mother!’

‘I’ll tell you how I came to live here, shall I? Lady Quellyn was just Joy Shirley then, but this house belonged to her and the Abbey belonged to her cousin Joan. My Aunt Ann was the caretaker of the Abbey, and I came to stay with her when my aunt on the farm was taken ill. I don’t know whether I remember the farm or not, because I went to see it about two years ago, and what I saw then and what I remembered are all mixed up in my mind. It’s a little place, but it has belonged to our family for a very long time.’

Maidlin talked on, telling how the news of her Italian inheritance had come and of her own plight, untrained for the position, not understanding, left to the care of Aunt Ann Watson; and of Joy’s adoption and the loving watchfulness which she had given during the difficult years of adaptation to the new circumstances. She told how Joy and Jen—‘she’s now Lady Marchwood and the mother of little Rosemary, you know’—had made her feel at home, and had overcome her shyness; and she was describing Rosamund’s welcome into the family circle when Benney’s hold on her relaxed and she lay breathing quietly, limp and tired out.

‘Oh, good!’ Maidlin whispered to the pillow. ‘She’s fast asleep. Now, if I can slip away without waking her——!’

Benney was far too weary to wake. Maidlin withdrew very gently and crept across to the other bed, and was asleep herself in five minutes.

She left Benedicta still sleeping in the morning, and went to her own room to dress, looking into Rosamund’s lavender room through the connecting door to tell what had happened during the night.

‘It sounded so terribly sad—“The moon had gone, and I couldn’t see the Abbey, and it was very dark. I felt sure Mother was dying.” I had to try to comfort the kiddy.’

‘I don’t wonder you’re late for breakfast. You’ve been terribly good to that girl,’ Rosamund commented. ‘There really wasn’t any need for you to take her on as your responsibility, just because her mother was hurt going away from the Abbey. She has aunts and a father and a brother, and yet you’re being a mother to her. You’re a real guardian of forlorn girls, Maid.’

‘I didn’t feel that a father or a brother or an aunt was quite enough. She doesn’t like the aunt, and the father must be worried to death, and poor Jim simply didn’t know what to say. I want to see her through. I shall keep her here; it’s near the hospital. But she’ll be afraid she’s in the way, so I’ll let her go to the Abbey with Auntie. Has there been any ’phone message for her? Or anything from Joy, or Jen?’

‘Nothing for Benneyben; perhaps her brother is coming. Joy will be home to-night; concert a great success. Jen’s been up all night with Rosemary, and the doctor’s coming early this morning; Mary will bring the twinnies back here.’

‘Oh, Ros! Then Rosemary isn’t so well?’

Rosamund’s lips were compressed in anxiety. ‘I’m afraid not; Jen’s terribly worried, but she has to keep it in because of Kenneth. She says he looks awful, so she has to try to buck him up.’

Maidlin brushed her hair in grieved silence. Suddenly she flung back the blue-black mane and went quickly into the next room.

‘Rose, apart from Jen and Kenneth, it’s hard on you. This week should have been all sunny for you. It looks as if there’d be a shadow over your wedding. It is hard luck on you, Ros dear!’

‘Oh, tosh, Maid! As if I mattered, if Rosemary’s really ill! But all the same, you’re right, Maidie, and it’s lovely of you to think of it,’ Rosamund owned. ‘I did want everybody to be happy this week. I can’t help being happy myself, and you know how I feel about Jen. If she’s having a bad time it will be tragic.’

‘It will spoil the perfectness of things,’ Maidlin agreed. ‘You know we’ll all be sorry, Ros. We’d give you a perfectly happy day, if we could.’

‘Since I’ve had Roddy I’ve known what it would mean to have a child who was ill and to feel helpless,’ Rosamund said soberly, gravely pitiful for Jen’s trouble. ‘Roderick is almost Rosemary’s age; less than a year between them. I know how I should feel in Jen’s place. Don’t think about me, Maid!’

‘We expected to think about nobody but you this week,’ and Maidlin went to put up her hair, looking more troubled still.

Jim Bennett arrived when she was finishing a late breakfast. He had called at the Abbey, but had been sent on to the Hall.

He was looking anxious when Maidlin appeared. ‘I hope Benney hasn’t been in the way, Miss Maidlin. I thought somehow you’d leave her in the Abbey with the woman there. I didn’t know you’d take her home with you. I’ll take her off your hands now, and we thank you——’

‘How is your mother? That’s what really matters.’

‘There’s no change,’ Jim said heavily. ‘They’re doing everything—but there isn’t much to do. She’s still unconscious.’

‘Then Benney must stay here. She’s so much nearer. She might be sent for at any time.’

‘That’s true. But we can’t leave her on your hands,’ Jim urged. ‘It’s frightfully kind of you, but I ought to take her home.’

‘She’d feel worse at home. There are new things and new people here to keep her interested. Could you fetch some clothes for her? Your maids would pack a suitcase. She won’t like to go on using mine. If you could bring her some things it would be a real help.’

‘I’ll do that, of course,’ Jim said eagerly. ‘But do you really think——’

‘I mean to keep her here, so don’t waste time talking about it. She isn’t awake yet; she couldn’t sleep for a long while last night. Do you want to see her, or shall I tell her you’ve been? You can see her when you bring her things at night.’

‘Pity to wake her,’ said Jim. ‘I’ll get along. I’ve some jobs to do in town for Dad. I can’t tell you, Miss Maidlin——’

‘Please don’t try! There’s no need. I like Benney, and I’m sure she’ll be happier here than at home alone. Come to the Abbey next time; the family is coming back to-day, so I shall send Benney there. I know she’d prefer it.’

‘Oh, I would! Thank you just terribly much!’ Benedicta cried, when she heard the plans. She had wakened with a feeling of foreboding, and then she had remembered. Her quick question—‘Mother? Is there any news?’—had brought Maidlin to her side, to tell of Jim’s visit and his disappointing report.

Benney hid her face in the pillow, and Maidlin went to fetch a breakfast tray. When she returned, Benney was sitting up and pulling on her stockings, her face set.

‘I’m not going to be a baby,’ she said steadily. ‘It’s a case of waiting and going on hoping. I was tired last night and it had all surprised me; but now I’ll be all right. I won’t be a bother to you, needing comforting and that sort of rot. Oh, I don’t want my breakfast in bed!’

‘I shouldn’t call it rot, if you needed comforting,’ Maidlin remarked. ‘As for breakfast, it will be easier for you to have it here; the maids have cleared away two breakfasts already, for I was late too. If you don’t like sitting up in bed, hop into a few clothes and wrap yourself in that kimono, and have it over here,’ and while Benney dressed she spread a table by the window.

Sitting on the window-sill while Benney tackled porridge and cream, Maidlin explained the plan she had made with Jim, and found, as she expected, that it met with warm approval.

‘I’ll love to live in the Abbey! If people come to see it I’ll hide in my little room. Will you be showing them round? Won’t you be too busy this week?’

Maidlin agreed. 'A woman from the village comes to help, if Auntie needs somebody when I'm not able to do it; often I'm away in Italy. She couldn't come on Saturday, but she'll be there this week, if she's needed. We shall all be busy; to-morrow we have to go to town, to try on frocks, and the wedding is on Thursday. The Abbey isn't open to the public on Sundays, so you won't be interrupted to-day. You won't be lonely; I shall come and talk to you, and Joy and the twins will want to see you. I'm afraid you won't see much of Mary-Dorothy at present.'

Benney looked up in disappointment. 'Is she too busy with her book?'

'Worse than that; she's going away,' Maidlin's face clouded. 'Jen—Lady Marchwood, next door, you know—has decided to send her two elder boys away, and Mary has offered to take them. Jen has an old house in Yorkshire, on the moors, and Nancy, who is in charge of it and gives holidays to tired people from town, will look after Andrew and Tony and give them a good time. But someone must take care of them on the journey; they'll go by car, but Henderson isn't enough—he can't watch the boys if he's driving, and they aren't little angels! So Mary will take them and hand them over to Nancy, and then come back to help us to marry Rosamund to the Earl. They're going off this morning.'

Benney attended to a boiled egg in silence, her face serious. She looked up at last. 'Does that mean that the little girl is worse?'

'It means she is really ill,' Maidlin admitted. 'We've been trying to think it was nothing much, and that it would soon pass off. But the doctor isn't satisfied, and Jen feels the boys had better be out of the house. We'd have them here, but with the wedding it would be too much. They love the moors and the Grange; they're thrilled to hear they're going. Tony doesn't understand, but I think Andrew guesses there's a reason.'

'I'm sorry about Rosemary,' Benney said gravely. 'Is it croup again?'

'No, it's her poor little tummy. The doctor's talking about appendicitis, and Jen's terribly frightened. It isn't as bad as that yet, but he's bothered, and poor Jen and Kenneth don't know how to bear the anxiety.'

'Oh, I am sorry! That's fearfully sad,' Benney said, her face full of sympathy. 'When—when I think about Mother, I'll remember little Rosemary too, Maidlin.'

Maidlin nodded. 'That's a brave thought. And when we pray for Rosemary we won't forget your mother, *Benedicta*.'

'It's dreadful for Miss Rosamund too. She was so kind last night, showing me her presents. Isn't she pretty, Maidlin?'

Maidlin laughed, in spite of her heavy heart. 'She's going to look lovely in her wedding gown. And when she's dressed up to go to Court as the Countess she'll be a picture. She's so tall and she carries herself so well.'

You'll see, the reports in the papers will say "stately" and "handsome." We tease her about it. She'll be a beautiful peeress! She'll show you the rest of her presents; and perhaps you'd like to go to church with us.'

'I would, but I haven't a Sunday frock.'

'Never mind. It's only a village church, and your frock's all right. Ros wants to go, for the last time before her wedding, and I want to go with her.'

'I'd like to go,' Benney said quietly.

CHAPTER IX

ROSAMUND'S WARNING

The twins came dancing home through the trees, with red curls waving and berets stuffed into the pockets of their green coats, while Benney waited on the terrace for Maidlin and Rosamund to come. They stopped at sight of a stranger and surveyed her critically.

‘’Nother new aunty?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘Where d’you come from? What’s your name?’ Margaret seized her hand and gazed up into her face.

‘It’s Aunty Benneyben, Margaret-Twin,’ said Rosamund, in the doorway.

‘Aunty Benneyben—how funny!’ Margaret shouted.

‘What is it really, Aunty Ros?’ Elizabeth demanded.

‘Aunty Benedicta.’

‘Oh, that’s funny too!’ Elizabeth’s laugh pealed out. ‘We’ll call her Aunty Benedicta! Is she going to stay?’

‘She’s staying in the Abbey. Have you been good girls?’

‘Gooder than good,’ Margaret shouted. ‘Can we come to church with you?’

‘We’d like to stay in the Abbey with you.’ Elizabeth looked up at Benney. ‘Some day we’re going to hide in the Abbey and stay there all night.’

‘With lots of chocolate and biscuits,’ Margaret added.

Mary Devine had followed the twins from the shrubbery and now joined them on the terrace. ‘Is this our new guest?’

‘This is Benedicta. She wants autographs and things when you’ve a minute to spare,’ Rosamund said. ‘I suppose you’ll have to pack? Can you tell us any more about Rosemary, Mary-Dorothy?’

Mary looked grave. ‘Only what I said on the ’phone, Ros. The doctor’s waiting, and hoping to ward off appendicitis. Kenneth is helping Jen to bear it.’

‘And Jen is helping Kenneth; I know. You’re helping, too, by removing the boys. What about your work? I thought it was wanted in a hurry.’

‘It must wait; I’ll get through, somehow. I couldn’t let Jen down. She wouldn’t ask me, because she knew, but she was planning for Kenneth to take the boys. I couldn’t have allowed that.’

‘No, she couldn’t do without him for two days just now.’

‘And he couldn’t do without her; he couldn’t leave home. I’ll manage the proofs somehow. I’m sure the “autographs and things” can wait till I come back.’ And she smiled at Benney as she went into the house.

‘Couldn’t anybody help her with her work?’ Benney asked, wistfully. ‘I know you’re all too busy. I suppose there wouldn’t be anything I could do? I’ll have plenty of time, and I’d love to help.’

‘Can you spell “accommodation”?’ Rosamund asked solemnly.

Benedicta laughed. ‘I can; really I can! I can spell. Couldn’t I read her book and mark anything that I thought looked funny? I’ve seen Father reading proofs; he sometimes does scientific articles, terribly dull stuff! Oh, *could* I read Miss Devine’s new book?’ Her eyes began to sparkle.

‘It’s quite an idea,’ Rosamund agreed. ‘Mary-Dorothy would read it again, of course, but she might be glad to feel somebody had been through it besides herself. We’ll ask her before she goes; she usually has two copies.’

When the big car from the Manor rolled up to the door of the Hall, with two eager yellow-haired boys at the window, Mary came hurrying out with her little case and thrust a bundle of galley-slips into Benney’s hands.

‘If you’ll really read those and mark anything that seems to you doubtful, you’ll truly be a blessing to me, Benedicta,’ she said.

The car swept away, followed by the cheers of the twins, and Benney clasped the proofs and turned a radiant face to Maidlin.

‘Where can I go to be quiet? I want to start at once!’

‘The Abbey’s the place. Run! There’s the path, and the gate’s unlocked,’ Maidlin said, laughing. ‘No, Twinnies, don’t go. Auntie Ben wants to work. We’ll talk to her later on.’

Jim Bennett was determinedly cheerful when he arrived during the evening. ‘Mother’s a little stronger,’ he said to Maidlin, who met him at the entry arch. ‘She isn’t conscious, but the doctors say her heart is better and we’re to keep hopeful. It’s the best they’ve said yet.’

‘I’m glad. Put the case in here, and then come and tell Benney. We’re spending the evening with her, while we wait for Sir Ivor and Lady Quellyn to come home. They’ll arrive about eight. This is Miss Kane, who is staying with us—till Thursday!’

There was a family party on the garth. Rosamund sat in a deck chair, writing notes of thanks at express speed. Elizabeth and Margaret were laboriously printing letters to Andrew and Tony on large sheets of paper, lying flat on a rug and kicking their heels in the air.

Benney was poring over the long slips of proofs, her face absorbed. Maidlin had been sitting beside her on the cloister steps, but she had heard the sound of the car, which Benedicta, in her interest in her task, had missed,

and had gone to welcome Jim and hear his news quietly, before he had time to ring.

‘Benedicta!’ she called.

Benney looked up; then the proofs went flying and she raced to the entrance archway. ‘Oh—Jimmy! Mother?’

Jim gave the latest report. ‘Not too bad, Ben.’

Benney drew a long breath. ‘No, it’s better. It might be much worse, anyway. Oh, I’m glad! Thanks for coming, Jimmy. Oh, Jim, I’m reading the proofs of a new book! It won’t be published till September; isn’t it thrilling? But I keep forgetting about mistakes and getting all worked up about the story; and then I have to go back and read the last few pages very carefully over again.’

‘I should read it right through, just for the story, and then go over it again for the mistakes,’ Rosamund suggested.

‘That’s a good idea! I’d love to know how it ends. Have you brought my clothes? That’s terribly nice of you, Jim!’

‘Show your brother where you’re going to sleep,’ Maidlin suggested. ‘Then he’ll feel sure you’ll be safe.’

Benney laughed. ‘He knows I’m safe with you, don’t you, Jimmy?’

‘That’s so.’ Jim gave Maidlin a look which made Rosamund glance at him sharply.

Maidlin was unconscious of her eyes and of Jim’s look. She led the way to the little room opening off the cloisters. ‘Come and peep in! Benney will feel like a nun in a cell. We shall have to call her Sister Benedicta.’

Benney’s laugh rang out again. Jim’s visit and the proofs of the story had done her good.

‘Who’s the man, Aunty Ros?’ asked Elizabeth.

‘Aunty Ben’s brother, silly,’ said Margaret. ‘Why don’t you listen? “Show-your-brother”; he must be her brother, mustn’t he, Elizabeth-Twin?’

‘Suppose so. Spell “rabbit”, Aunty Ros.’

‘I can,’ Margaret answered again. ‘I can tell you, Twin.’

‘Yes, but you might say it wrong,’ Elizabeth retorted. ‘I know you can always do things, but you don’t always do them right.’

Margaret kicked out promptly, and Elizabeth hurled herself upon her. There was a wild flurry of red heads and green frocks, and then the twins sat up, tousled but reconciled.

‘That’s all right!’ said Margaret.

‘Spell “rabbit”, Aunty Ros!’ Elizabeth went back, determined and unsatisfied, to the point of departure.

‘“R A B I T T”,’ Margaret shouted.

Rosamund had grabbed her pen and papers and the finished letters. She spelt 'rabbit', and shook her head at Margaret.

Elizabeth chuckled. 'She didn't know, did she?'

'My way's just as good,' Margaret remarked. 'I shall put R A B I T T in my letter to Andy.'

'Andy'll laugh. He knows "rabbit". He'll think you're a baby, like Michael and Rosemary, Margaret-Twin.' And Elizabeth went on with her letter.

Jim had scarcely gone when the 'phone rang in Mrs. Watson's little sitting-room. Maidlin started up, anxious lest it should be later and worse news for Benedicta; the idea had not occurred to Benney herself, for Jim's report had satisfied her for the moment.

Presently Maidlin came running back. 'Mother's home, Twinnies! An hour earlier than we thought!'

The twins leapt to their feet and raced across the garth and disappeared.

'I'll tidy up, if you want to go!' Benedicta exclaimed, as Maidlin began to gather the rugs and cushions, while Rosamund collected her belongings. 'I'll do it; I know where you keep the things.'

'Thanks, Benneyben. We'll leave it to you,' said Rosamund.

'Will you be all right for the night, Benney? Aunty will give you supper.'

'Oh yes, thanks frightfully! I know you'll be busy now.'

As Maidlin and Rosamund went together down the tresaut passage, and Benney set to work to tidy the garth, Rosamund remarked, 'That boy looked at you as if he'd like to eat you, Madalena.'

'Jim?' Maidlin said, startled. 'Oh, Ros—tosh! He's thinking about nothing but his mother!'

'As soon as he stops worrying about his mother he's going to begin thinking about you. He's sure you're the most wonderful girl in the world.'

Maidlin looked at her in dismay. 'Ros, you aren't in earnest? He's—he's only a little boy! He's years younger than I am!'

Rosamund laughed. 'So that's how you feel about poor Jim!'

'I felt like his mother last night, when he was in such trouble. And I felt like his aunt in the afternoon, when he was shy and silly. Do you suppose I'd have been able to forget what a sight I looked, and go and talk to him in all my fringe and beads, if I hadn't felt he was just a boy who needed to be helped?'

'Did you?' Rosamund asked, amused. 'You talked to him in your gown, with your hair down? Then I don't wonder, and I don't blame him. But you'll have to take care, or you'll break his little heart. He still feels as he

did at your first meeting! What was it he said? "Topping kid! Ripping eyes!"—was that it? He thinks you're marvellous.'

Maidlin coloured. 'I shall keep out of his way. Ros, he's only twenty! Benney told me.'

'Quite a boy,' Rosamund agreed, much relieved. 'You aren't going to marry anyone four years younger than yourself; quite right, Maid!'

'I'm not going to marry anybody, but if I ever do, it won't be a little boy,' Maidlin retorted, looking disturbed.

Benney, delighted with her new quarters, satisfied for the moment about her mother, and absorbed in her proof-sheets, had noticed nothing unusual in the way Jim's gaze had followed Maidlin. She drew Mrs. Watson on to tell stories of her new friends, during supper in the little room within the walls, and went to bed with pictures before her eyes of red-haired Joan and Joy, exactly alike and just like the twins were now,—but older, of course—dancing by moonlight with their school chums on the garth or searching the underground passages for mysterious inmates of the Abbey.

But in bed and alone, the strangeness of it all came down on her; she remembered that her mother, though stronger, was still unconscious, and fear came back. Benney crept out of bed, pulled on her big coat and slippers, and sat by the narrow window, gazing out at the garth, lit up by moonlight—the beautiful chapter-house doorway, the shadow under the high refectory walls, the moonlit gap where the church had been. It soothed her at last, and she remembered the little girl at the Manor who was so ill and the anxious parents, no doubt keeping watch as she herself was doing.

'We can't help Mother or Rosemary,' she sighed. 'We'd do anything for them, but there's nothing to do. Except—we can ask God to take care of them and give them back to us. He can help them. I could do that; I'm sure Lady Marchwood has asked Him already.'

When she slipped into bed again she was comforted, and this time she fell asleep. But the memory of the moon shining on the arches and old pointed doorways stayed with her as one of her most precious pictures of the Abbey.

'Maidlin rang up and left a message,' said Mrs. Watson, when Benney came in to breakfast.

'It does sound odd!' Benney said to herself. 'She says "Miss Rosamund" and I always expect her to say "Miss Maidlin". But of course she can't, as she's her aunt. It is queer!'

Mrs. Watson explained that the party at the Hall were setting out for town very early, as they had a great deal to do, but that Maidlin hoped Benedicta had slept well and she would come to see her in the evening.

‘I said as how you was still asleep and I hadn’t woke you, and she said that was right,’ Ann finished, less careful of her English than usual, as her guest was only a girl.

Benney thanked her for the message, and reflected that it was a very good thing for Maidlin that someone had come to the rescue and had not left her to be brought up by her aunt.

‘Did Maidlin say how Rosemary is this morning?’ she asked.

‘She said, to tell you that Lady Jen would have liked to ask you to the Manor, but she’s too anxious about the little girl.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t like her to trouble about me! It was kind of her to think of it. I’m afraid Rosemary isn’t much better,’ and Benedicta looked sober, and wondered what news Jim would bring.

Jim, too, looked serious when he came to report. The doctors were not quite so well satisfied; Mrs. Bennett was not keeping up her strength as they had hoped.

Benney’s lips quivered. ‘Oh—Jimmy! Last night I hoped——!’

‘We all did,’ he said heavily. ‘You should have seen how Dad cheered up! He’s down again this morning. He sent you his best love.’

‘Poor Daddy! Would he like me to be there?’

‘He’s coming to see you this afternoon, if the people here won’t mind. He’d rather you didn’t come to the hospital, Ben.’

‘They’ve all gone to London, to try on bridesmaids’ frocks. I know Mrs. Watson will let Daddy come, and I’ll show him my little room, and the Abbey.’

‘Isn’t Miss Maidlin at home?’

‘Of course not. She’s the Maid of Honour at the wedding; she had to go about her frock. The other bridesmaids are the little twins and Miss Rosamund’s cousins; they’re big girls at school somewhere. But Maidlin’s her chum, and she’s the chief one.’

Jim looked disappointed, and his visit was short. His father had given him commissions to do in the City, and Jim was eager to help and to be at work in some way. He hurried off, and Benedicta was thankful to turn to Mary Devine’s proofs, to keep her mind from dwelling on what might happen.

CHAPTER X

JEN IN THE SHADOW

It was nearly twelve o'clock, and at twelve the Abbey would be open to the public. Benney had promised to keep near her door and to slip out of sight if tourists arrived. She put the proofs away carefully and went for a ramble through the ruins in her last few moments of safety.

Climbing into an embrasure up in the dormitory, to look down from the narrow window-slit across at the cloisters, she was startled to see somebody on the garth. It was a tall girl dressed in blue, who seemed very much at home, for she was bareheaded, with waving yellow curls.

Benney stared down at her, half indignant. 'It isn't twelve yet! Why did Mrs. Watson let her in? She looks as if she owned the Abbey! Could it be anybody who knows Maidlin? Perhaps she's come to see her; perhaps she thought Maid would be caretaking. I'd better go and explain. But why didn't Mrs. Watson tell her?'

She climbed out of her perch and went carefully down the uneven stairs and out into the sunshine. The girl in blue was just going into the chapter-house.

'I say!' Benney called. 'Are you looking for anybody?'

'I rather think I'm looking for you. Are you Benedicta—or Benneyben, as Rosamund calls you?'

'Oh! But who are you? They didn't tell me anyone was coming. Yes, I'm Benney Bennett.'

'It's a fascinating name! I'm plain Jen. I've come to say how sorry I am I can't ask you to come to me while the others are in town.'

'Not—not Lady Marchwood, from next door?' Benney cried incredulously. 'Not the mother of the little girl who is ill?'

'Rosemary Jane, my only little girl,' Jen said gravely. 'Come and sit with me out here, Benneyben.'

She led the way through the chapter-house to the back, where the vaulted roof ended abruptly and there was an open space and a low moss-covered wall. She perched herself on this and gave her hand to Benney to help her up. 'Where were you, when you saw me? In the refectory?'

'No, in the dormitory, in one of the window-seats, looking at the cloisters. I saw you walk out on to the garth.'

'And you wondered what I meant by it. Look at the garth now, under the vault of this beautiful roof! I love to look back at it from here, especially in

sunshine.'

'It's glorious,' Benney said dreamily. Then she asked quickly, 'How is Rosemary? It was lovely of you to think about me just now.'

'She's asleep, and that's good for her. The doctor has sent in a nurse, who knows all there is to do, and our own Nanny is there as well. Kenneth begged me to go for a walk, so I said I'd come to the Abbey. I thought—I mean I knew—it would help. I couldn't come here without feeling better.'

Jen's face was very grave, and Benney stole a look at her. Her first impression, that this girl did not seem old enough to be anybody's mother, began to change. She felt a sudden impulse to tell her own trouble, to cry out for sympathy and help, as if Lady Marchwood had been her mother as well as Rosemary's.

'How is your mother this morning?' It was almost as if Jen had read her thoughts. 'I heard the news was better last night; I was so glad.'

'It isn't so good to-day. She isn't quite so well.' Benney spoke bravely but not very steadily.

'Oh, my dear! I'm so sorry! I hoped she was going on well,' Jen cried.

Then, how Benney did not know, she was in Lady Marchwood's arms, crying out all her fear. 'Oh, I'm sorry! You've trouble enough of your own. But you understood, and you were kind,' she sobbed.

Jen soothed and comforted her. 'I'm glad I came. Benedicta, we must help one another; we're in the same trouble. The others have to think about Rosamund just now, but you and I can't forget.'

'I—I pray for your little girl when I pray for Mother.'

'I'll do that too,' Jen said simply. 'Perhaps they'll both be well soon. We're doing everything we can for them, you know.'

'Lady Jen!' Benney whispered. 'Why? It's bothering me all the time. Why does God let things happen? Why was Mother hurt? She's so good to everybody. It seems so cruel.'

'Oh, my dear!' Jen cried, from the depths of her sore heart. 'Oh, my dear! I'm saying it all the time! Why should my baby girl be like this? We've taken great care of her. Why should she have to suffer? Why should our one little girl be so delicate that we have constant anxiety about her? Why?'

Benney quivered. 'Well, Lady Jen? Why? Doesn't God care? Or doesn't He know?'

Jen's arms tightened round her. 'Put away those two thoughts, Benney. Fight them—banish them! God must know, and He must care, or all we've always believed is wrong. There must be some other reason.'

'I've been thinking—perhaps it has been all wrong,' Benney whispered. 'If God is like I've always thought, then I want to know why——?'

‘It’s the whole world’s question; the world has always asked “Why?”’ Jen said, slowly and very gently. ‘You’ve come up against it early, Benedicta. I met the question years ago; a very great friend had an accident like your mother’s, on her way home after coming to see me. She’s well and strong again now, but at the time we thought she would die, and I wanted to know why such a thing should happen. And I lost my mother very suddenly, without any chance to say good-bye; I was here, enjoying myself, and she was staying in Scotland. I was very full of questions and rebellion then.’

‘You’ve had rotten luck,’ Benney whispered, struggling for self-control.

Jen smiled at the schoolgirl expression. Then she grew grave again. ‘The question is worse now; more urgent. It seems so hard on my baby girl. Why should she have such bad luck? Is it only luck? Just chance? Why should Rosemary be so frail when the boys are so sturdy, and Kenneth and I are always well and strong? And then, Benedicta, I have to try to remember that all the rest of us *are* strong and healthy; that I have three fine boys, who have never been ill—except when Andrew knocked Tony downstairs by accident!—and that my husband never has a day’s illness of any kind. For all that I must surely be thankful. And you must remember that your mother might have been killed, and your brother too; they might both have gone, or have been injured and crippled. And—oh, Benney, you must be thankful that it wasn’t your poor brother’s fault. If the accident had been due to his carelessness, think how terrible you’d have felt, now and always!’

Benney shivered. ‘Oh, Lady Jen! I hadn’t thought of that. I’m very thankful. Poor Jimmy!’

‘There’s always something, if you look for it, I believe. But, all the same,’ Jen said brokenly, her courage failing for a moment, ‘if I should lose my baby girl——!’

‘But it isn’t as bad as that, is it?’ Benney whispered, awed.

‘I don’t know; the doctor doesn’t know yet. If they should have to operate—she’s only three, and not very strong——!’

‘Oh, Lady Jen!’ Benney, with no words for this tragedy, put her arms about Lady Marchwood in a rush of sympathy.

Jen held her closely. ‘Kenneth and I faced up to that last night; that we might lose Rosemary. It’s better to look at it honestly.’

‘It’s brave,’ Benney whispered.

‘We’ll try to be brave, if it comes. But it hasn’t happened yet.’ Jen raised her head and spoke steadily again. ‘Benedicta—I love your name!—we mustn’t lose our faith and blame God. I don’t believe He sends these troubles. Years ago, I felt that couldn’t be possible.’

‘They just come?’ Benney queried. ‘But—but God could stop them, Lady Jen. Doesn’t He want us to be happy?’

‘What do you think, “Blessing”?’

‘Oh, how nice of you! I’m sure He does. Then why doesn’t He interfere?’

‘That’s what we all want to know,’ Jen confessed. ‘But would we really like it, if He did? In this special case, in your trouble and mine, we should, of course. But if God intervened in one special case, wouldn’t He have to do it in all? And we’d never feel safe, or certain of the laws of the world, or anything.’

‘But if things just come, by chance, we can never feel really safe,’ Benney argued.

‘We’re at least as safe as if the laws of the world were broken at any moment, for the good of one particular person or family. We know some of the laws and we can depend on them. The other way would be all confusion; the world would be just a mess.’

‘Yes, I see that. But what law—oh, it was that man’s carelessness that made Mother be hurt!’

‘Your law is clear enough,’ Jen said grimly. ‘If a lorry comes too fast out of a side road, don’t say it was God who hurt your mother! It’s harder for me; we haven’t been careless; I can’t see any reason at all why Rosemary should suddenly be taken seriously ill.’

‘Seems to me we can never feel safe,’ Benney said again.

‘Perhaps we aren’t meant to feel safe,’ Jen suggested. ‘Perhaps it would be bad for us. Wouldn’t we settle down and forget God? Aren’t we meant to trust?’

‘Yes, Lady Jen, but if God doesn’t help’—Benney protested.

‘I didn’t say that. I said, or I meant, that He doesn’t seem to interfere with things that come because of the working out of His laws. The trouble is that we don’t know all the laws, and so we don’t understand. But—help! I know God helps. He helps me to help Kenneth, and teaches Ken to help me. He let you and me meet to-day, so that we could help one another.’

‘Oh—! I haven’t helped you. You’ve helped me a lot!’

‘It has helped me to have somebody new to talk to, when Joy and the rest are in town. Benedicta, I’m only groping for the meaning of things, as you are, and I may be wrong; later on I may learn to understand better. But I believe that things are allowed to happen because it would be worse for us if they were interfered with, in ways we can’t understand. And I know that as soon as anything hard does happen, all God’s help is ready to be poured into us, to make us strong and brave and wise to bear it—if we are ready to take the help. Think that over, my dear. Now I must go home. If you’d like to come with me, Kenneth wouldn’t mind, and I know you’d be very quiet in the house.’

‘Oh, no!’ Benney looked up quickly, adoring gratitude in her face. ‘I won’t come to-day. I love being in the Abbey, and Daddy is coming to see me this afternoon. When Rosemary is better I’ll come, if you’ll have me then.’

‘Then we’ll wait.’ Jen kissed her. ‘Come with me to the garden gate, Benedicta.’

‘Is Rosemary like the boys?’ Benney asked. ‘I saw them in the car; they’ve yellow curls, like yours. Rosemary must be pretty!’

Jen laughed softly. ‘She isn’t; not really pretty. She’s not a scrap like any of the others, Benney; she’s a dark little gipsy,—brown hair, brown eyes; a regular brownie!’

‘Oh, but how odd! Why is she brown?’

‘She takes after her grandmother—my husband’s mother. The twins’ father was like her too; Rosemary Jane is more like her Uncle Andrew than her own people! But she’s a darling, all the same.’

‘Oh, I’m sure she is!—Lady Jen!’ Benney ventured, as they went through the tresaunt into the Abbot’s garden, gay with early wallflowers and daffodils, ‘my Camp Fire name is Ohitaya, “to be brave,” and I’ll try to deserve it. But I’ve been thinking—so many of you here are being brave just now. Maidlin was just terribly brave when she went up on to that platform all alone the other night.’

‘She did it to please Joy. Maid can do anything, if she cares enough for the person she’s doing it for; and of course she can do her biggest things for Joy,’ Jen commented. ‘I agree, Benneyben. She was brave.’

‘And Miss Rosamund. She needs to be brave, to turn into a Countess when she wasn’t born one. She’s keen on the Earl, anyone can see; but all the same she’s a little frightened of it all. I think she’s very brave.’

‘I’m sure you’re right. Ros has plenty of courage, and just now she needs every bit she has. But she loves Geoffrey, and that will carry her through.’

‘And you’re the bravest of them all, because your trouble’s the worst,’ Benney ended.

‘I’ll try to deserve that! What about yourself, Benedicta? Aren’t you the fourth brave person?’

‘I’ll try to be,’ Benney agreed, and went soberly back into the Abbey.

CHAPTER XI ROSAMUND'S TOY-SHOP

Maidlin found a note from Jen awaiting her, when the party returned from town.

‘I saw your Benedicta. Nice kid; we had a talk in the Abbey this morning. She’s in bad trouble; her mother’s not so well. Try to look her up before night, Maid; it will help her. I’ll ring Joy about ten, to give you our latest report, but there’s not much to say. R.J. is asleep, but we don’t know for how long. She’s still having a lot of pain, and Doc. isn’t satisfied. Jenny-Wren.’

Maidlin passed the note to Joy, her face grave. ‘I’ll go into the Abbey, as soon as we’ve had dinner. Poor Jen! She’s having a terrible time.’

After a very early dinner, or in the case of the twins a late supper, the children were sent off to bed, and Rosamund sat down to open the day’s parcels and letters.

‘Shall I come with you, Maid?’ Joy asked.

‘No, you’re tired, and Ros wants to show her treasures to somebody.’

‘I want to show them to you too, Maid. I know you must go to Benneyben, but don’t stay too long.’

‘I ought to see your new girl, Maid,’ Joy began.

‘Benney would like to see you, but she won’t expect you to-night. I’ll come back as soon as I can, but if the kiddy is in trouble it won’t be easy to leave her.’

‘Ring up, if you want us to come,’ said Rosamund. ‘Look, Maid! Lovely handmade lace—from Cicely Everett! How kind of her! She only knows me as a friend of Joy’s or as part of the May-day procession.’

‘Cicely wouldn’t let one of our Queens be married without remembering her.’ Joy came to look. ‘That’s really worth having, Rose; good old Buckinghamshire stuff, by the look of it.’

‘Cicely says that’s what it is,’ Rosamund glanced through the note. ‘To remind me of the Hamlet Club, Madam President says. It’s lovely of her.’

‘Another letter to write!’ Maidlin teased, as she threw over her shoulders the big cloak she wore to cover her Camp Fire gown.

She went anxiously through the Abbey, and paused in the tresaut archway to look across the garth, for Jim was sitting with Benedicta on the

cloister step. Rosamund's warning came back to Maidlin's mind, and she flushed and hesitated. Then, at a ringing laugh from Benney, she forgot herself and hurried across the garth, throwing back the hood of her dark cloak.

'Benedicta! You sound happy! Is there better news?'

'Oh, Maidlin, yes—isn't it marvellous?' Benney sprang to meet her. 'Mother's really better! She's conscious, and she knew Daddy and spoke to him—just a word or two! Isn't it too wonderful?'

'Oh, I'm so glad! Oh, Benney dear, that's splendid! How relieved you must be!' Maidlin looked at Jim in frank delight.

He had risen and stood looking down at her. 'Yes, it's a great relief. We're all feeling quite different. Dad has cheered up no end.'

'He was quite jolly when he came this afternoon,' Benney said happily. 'He was able to be really interested in the Abbey, Maidlin; I did enjoy showing it to him!'

'Tell me more about it.' Maidlin looked at Jim.

'It will be a long business,' he said, 'but the doctors hope she'll be all right now. She'll have to stay where she is for some time; they won't let her be moved. Oughtn't I to take Ben home, Miss Maidlin? It won't be quite so bad for her now.'

Maidlin turned to Benedicta, and broke into a laugh at sight of Benney's face. 'She doesn't look as if she wanted to go. She isn't in anybody's way here. I believe she wants to stay for the wedding.'

'Yes, I do!' Benney cried. 'I've heard so much about it, and I do like Miss Rosamund. I want to see her as a bride! I can enjoy it now; oh, Jim, let me stay! And I love the Abbey; I want to go on sleeping in it! I felt last night as if I belonged to it, when I looked at the moonlight on the garth.'

'Why weren't you asleep?' Maidlin scolded. 'Let her stay for a few days, if your father won't mind,' she said to Jim.

He agreed gladly. 'We'd far rather she was here than alone at home, and Dad won't leave Mother yet. I'm all the time between here and the hospital and town. Ben's far happier here, if she really isn't in your way.'

'Of course she isn't. We love to have her here. We're getting used to seeing her little white head bobbing about in the cloisters!'

'I want to go to see Rosemary as soon as she's better,' Benney added. 'Is there any news to-night? I'd have rung up and asked, but I didn't want to bother Lady Jen.'

Maidlin shook her head. 'No good news. We have to wait.'

They stood talking for several minutes. Jim seemed reluctant to go, and kept remembering something more to tell Benedicta.

‘I’m glad his mother’s better,’ Maidlin said to herself. ‘But I almost wish he was still a little anxious about her! He has time to think now, and I believe Ros was right. I do hope he won’t be silly!’

Jim said good-night at last, and Benney went with him to the gate and then came back, full of questions about the day in town. ‘What are the frocks like? Did they fit? Is it an all-white wedding?’

‘Rosamund and the twins will be all in white. Her cousins and I will be in very palest lavender. Ros loves the colour and she can’t have any other; the family is still in mourning for the little Earl, who was killed on his motor-cycle last June. When Geoffrey asked Ros to marry him, no one thought he’d ever be the Earl.’

‘She couldn’t have colours, of course, but lavender will be pretty, and much better than all of you in white. It will suit you! What about the other bridesmaids—her cousins?’

‘The elder one, nearly eighteen, is very dark; she’s Lady Rhoda Kane, the little Earl’s sister. The younger one is Rosalie, her cousin; she’s fair, like Rosamund and the rest of the family. It will suit us all very well.’

‘I want to see the wedding. It was marvellous of you to guess,’ Benney said.

As Maidlin had begun to fear, Jim found it necessary to visit his sister at least twice a day, to bring the latest report. The news continued to be good, and it seemed as if a ’phone message would have been enough; but Jim did not think so, and was sure he would remember things to tell Benney, if he saw her, which he would forget if he spoke by ’phone.

‘It’s awfully decent of Jimmy!’ Benedicta said to herself on Tuesday evening. ‘He’s being terribly kind. I didn’t know he cared so much about me! I’d much rather talk to him than be told things by ’phone, and he seems to understand. It’s really rather surprising; he’s been here twice to-day!’

Then she forgot Jim, for Lady Quellyn and the twins were coming across the garth. They were so much alike, all three with waving red hair cut short and deep brown eyes, that they made a beautiful picture in the setting of the old grey walls and arches.

‘Oh, they’re lovely!’ Benney murmured, seized with sudden shyness.

‘Do you like living in the Abbey?’ Joy Quellyn smiled at her.

‘I love the Abbey! I shan’t want to go away.’

‘So you saw us at Maid’s concert. Did you hear Margaret-Twin shouting to Maid to encourage her?’

Margaret reddened; she had been teased about that shout by everybody. ‘She didn’t hear. Nobody did.’

‘They did. They looked at you, Twin,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Some of them laughed.’

‘They didn’t! They didn’t!’ Margaret shouted, and dashed at her sister, butting her in the middle with her head.

Elizabeth collapsed on the grass of the garth. ‘I didn’t know you were going to fight,’ she panted, holding her stomach with both hands. ‘You wait till I can breathe, and I’ll butt you down too, Twin.’

‘Come on!’ said Margaret.

‘Children, I shall send you home,’ their mother scolded. ‘We can’t have fighting in the Abbey. It’s almost bedtime, anyway.’

‘Yes, we’d better be careful,’ Elizabeth agreed. ‘All right! We’ll see to it after we’re in bed.’

‘Elizabeth!’ Joy protested.

‘But she knocked me down, Mother!’

‘You made her angry. You shouldn’t have laughed at her.’

‘Margaret-Twin’s got a beast of a temper,’ Elizabeth explained for Benney’s benefit. ‘She’s really dreadful sometimes, Aunty Benedicta.’

‘I aren’t! I’m not! I haven’t! I’ll butt you down again!’

‘Margaret, be quiet! Elizabeth, why do you tease her? You’re the worst girls I know!’ Joy remonstrated. ‘I shall have to get rid of you and ask Aunty Jen to give me Andrew and Tony instead.’

‘You wouldn’t want them for very long,’ Elizabeth remarked, eyeing her mother anxiously.

Margaret flung herself on Joy. ‘Don’t do it! You’ve got to keep us, for good and all! You don’t want boys! They’re horrid!’

‘Andrew and Tony aren’t horrid. Mother might want them,’ Elizabeth began doubtfully.

‘I want you two girls, more than anybody else, but I want you to be good. Go and ask Mrs. Watson for some of her peppermint rock.’

The twins danced away, much relieved, and Joy looked at Benedicta and laughed.

‘They’re marvellous kids!’ Benney exclaimed. ‘Oh, Lady Quellyn, how is Rosemary to-night?’

Joy’s face clouded. ‘Not very well. I’m beginning to be afraid the Manor people won’t be able to leave her on Thursday for the wedding, and that will hurt us all. Rosamund is very fond of Jen; she wants her to be there. Rosamund sent a message to you. If you’ll come to the house to-morrow, you can see all her presents spread out on view in the library. She calls it her toy-shop. “Tell Benedicta to come and see my toy-shop,” she said.’

‘Oh, I’d love to do that! Will you tell her I’ll come? Lady Quellyn, what has Maidlin given her? I didn’t like to ask Maid herself.’

‘A lovely sapphire pendant. It was difficult to know what to do for Rosamund, as Geoffrey can give her everything, but she hasn’t much

jewellery; she'll have the family jewels, of course, but we all felt we'd like her to have something really good of her own, which would remind her of her life here with us. She loves blue, and she'll wear it again when she can go back to colours. So Ivor and I, and Jen and Kenneth, have joined together to give her a necklace of beautiful sapphires; they're really lovely. But Maid has been so much Rosamund's pal that she felt she must give her a separate gift; so she chose a pendant to match, which can be worn with our necklet. Ros was rather overcome when she saw them; she said they were far too good, even for a future peeress. But she loves them, and at first she said she'd wear them on Thursday—her only touch of colour. They match her eyes and suit her beautifully.'

'That's a lovely present,' Benney cried. 'She'll wear them at all her big dinners and parties, and she'll think of all of you and the Abbey.'

'That's what she says. As for the twinnies——!' and Joy began to laugh.

'Oh, did they give her something? What was their present?'

'They insisted on choosing it themselves. They saw our necklace and Maid's pendant, and they went away and talked it over. When we were in town, they teased to be taken into Woolworth's, and they came out with a chain of blue beads, exactly the colour of ours, for which they had given sixpence. They're convinced their present is just as good as ours! Rosamund laughed till she nearly cried, and promised faithfully to wear theirs sometimes in the morning and ours in the evening. The children were enormously pleased, and their beads are there, among all the other gifts, with a card printed by themselves. It was their own idea, and Rosamund says she'd far rather have it than something I had chosen for them.'

'Oh, how marvellous of them!' Benney cried, laughing.

'Rosamund argued that she'd had her presents already and we oughtn't to give her any more. We all gave her something for her cottage, when she left us and went to live in Sussex. Maid gave her china and the twins gave rose bushes, and I furnished her bedroom and Jen did the kitchen. Kenneth put in her bath and painted the house! So we all had a share in her new home, and she said that ought to be enough. But we couldn't let her go and be a Countess without wedding gifts.'

Benedicta agreed. 'She has lovely things; I saw some of them.'

'Lady Verriton has given her pearls, with a note saying she was keeping them to give to her son's wife, when he married—the boy Earl who was killed, you know. Rosamund was so touched that she nearly cried; she's very happy because the whole family has accepted her, and they're all friendly—they weren't at first. So she asked if we would mind if she wore the pearls at her wedding, instead of our sapphires; she felt it would please Lady Verriton so much. We agreed it was the right thing to do. Rhoda—the elder of the

schoolgirl bridesmaids—is giving Ros two pedigree pups, from her own pet Sealyham, called Adam and Eve, to remind Ros of something that happened at school last autumn; Ros knows how Rhoda loves dogs and she’s pleased and happy to have these. But they won’t be on show to-morrow!’

‘Are other people coming to see her things?’

‘Oh no! She’d hate that. But one or two family friends have been asked—her aunts from Sussex, and a few special girls from the school there. Rosamund ran a tuck-shop for the school and is a great favourite with the girls, and they’re coming to the wedding to be a guard of honour, in their uniform. They look charming in it.’

‘Do you mean gym. tunics?’

‘Oh no! Wait till you see them!’ Joy said, laughing.

Her eyes wandered over the garth and the Abbey buildings. ‘Rosamund is going to feel badly about saying good-bye to all this; she loves the Abbey, as we all do. Oh, how glad I am I haven’t had to go away!’ There was a note of almost passionate thankfulness in her voice.

‘It’s marvellous for the twins to grow up here,’ Benedicta ventured.

‘I’m so very glad it has been possible,’ Joy said quietly. ‘Come, children! We must go home to bed!’

CHAPTER XII

BENEDICTA SPEAKS OUT

Jim arrived early next morning to give Benney the latest news, and was fortunate enough to find Maidlin in the Abbey. His face lit up at sight of her, and he turned to her in a way that suddenly roused his sister's suspicions of his unusual devotion.

'My hat!' Benedicta said to herself. 'I thought Jimmy came to see me! Has he forgotten Gail Alwyn?'

She watched his face anxiously while he talked to Maidlin. His shyness had gone, in the strain of the last few days and in his gratitude for her sympathy, and his admiration and eagerness to keep her there were obvious.

'If Jimmy goes on like this, I shall have to tell Maidlin about Gail,' Benney said to herself. 'I don't believe Maid wants Jim to be silly; and Gail's his real friend, though we don't know where she's gone. She's sure to turn up again, and Jimmy will be in a hole. I can't let him go on looking at Maidlin like that! She's perfectly marvellous, and I'd love to be related to her; but I know Jim was really fond of Gail, and he would be again, if he saw her. He's dazzled by Maid, but it's only for the time and because Gail isn't here. I wish we knew where she is! She's so sensible; she'd suit Jimmy awfully well—in a few years, of course. And Jim's just a kid; he ought to wait. But Maidlin's different—she wouldn't do for Jim at all. She wants somebody much older! I think I shall tell her about Gail.'

Maidlin escaped at last, and Jim made an excuse and hurried away. He had seen Benedicta's look and he was not anxious to hear her opinion; he was not easy in his mind, but in Maidlin's presence he forgot everything. Away from her he took himself to task, and then remembered that he had not seen Gail Alwyn for ten months, and might never see her again.

'I bet Quellyn knows where she is!' he thought savagely. 'I've a good mind to go to the house and ask him. But he wouldn't tell me last time I asked.'

He was acutely conscious that Sir Ivor's refusal had been accompanied by sound advice, suggesting that Jim should do something to show himself worthy of a girl who probably had a great career before her as a pianist; and that so far he had done nothing. Sir Ivor's attitude had been entirely sensible and natural, and Jim knew it, and resented the fact bitterly.

Benney was sitting in her usual corner, on the steps of the cloister, when she saw Mary Devine come out on to the garth. Thoughts of Jim and

Maidlin vanished, and she sprang up and ran to meet her.

‘I’ve finished your book! It’s marvellous! I’m thrilled to know the authoress! I found some mistakes, besides those you’d marked.’

‘Did you? Splendid!’ said the authoress. ‘Show me! Are they ones I’d missed, or are they in the part I hadn’t read?’

‘There are a lot in that part,’ Benney said eagerly.

‘I’m sure there are. I’ve found several myself.’

‘But I did find one or two in the part you’d done.’ Benedicta eyed her anxiously. ‘Is it cheek? I’m sure they’re wrong.’

‘That’s right! That’s what I want. Let’s look at them together. *I’m* thrilled to see what I’d missed!’

Benney laughed shyly and brought the proofs, and they bent over them together.

‘Shouldn’t that be “if”, instead of “is”? It doesn’t make sense.’

Mary groaned. ‘The hardest sort of mistake to find! If a word is spelt wrongly you notice it; but if it’s a proper word, but the wrong word, your eyes are satisfied, and if your mind isn’t on it every minute, you let things slip through. I’m very much obliged to you! What next?’

‘There’s “and” twice over, down at the bottom there.’

Mary frowned. ‘How stupid! Thank you very much. Any more?’

‘Shouldn’t there be two quotation marks at the end of that line? There’s only one, and everywhere else it’s two.’

‘Good for you! That was a hard one.’ Mary made a dash in the margin.

‘And there’s “fff” in the middle of “offer”. Surely it doesn’t need three?’

‘Wonderful girl!’ Mary cried. ‘I said you’d be a blessing! You shall have a copy when it’s ready.’

Benedicta gave a shout. ‘Autographed? Oh, Miss Devine! You’ll write your name in it?’

‘I will. But it’s ghastly to know I’d missed all those. I shall have to engage a permanent proofreader.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so! I don’t see how you could do proofs with so much going on—a wedding in the house, and Maid’s first concert!’

‘I hope it was only the extra excitement that made me miss so much,’ Mary said ruefully. ‘I really came to fetch you to see Rosamund’s toy-shop. She has some lovely things.’

Benney had wandered round, exclaiming that she knew no more adjectives to use, when a car drove up and a party of girls were shown in. One was about sixteen, a lively person with bobbed, brown curls, but the others were older, and Benney shrank into a corner and watched with interest as Rosamund greeted them.

The younger girl was called Daffodil; a senior who had some likeness to her was Tamzine. A girl with a long brown plait and quiet brown eyes was Robin, and another with black curls was Gwyneth. ‘Sonny’ had fair, curly hair, and Benedicta wondered what her real name could be.

Another car drove up, and Benney slipped away. ‘I’ve had my turn! They’ll be crowded in that little room.’

From among the trees she saw a family party arrive, and stared with wondering eyes at somebody who might have been Lady Quellyn, with a little girl of nine, who might have been one of the twins.

‘How frightfully odd! Another family just like the one at the Hall! I wonder if that’s Lady Quellyn’s twin sister?’

Presently she saw the two together, Lady Quellyn and the stranger, walking in the Abbey and talking with serious faces. Benney kept out of sight in her bedroom and did not interrupt.

‘I expect they’re talking about poor little Rosemary, and saying that Lady Jen won’t be able to come to the wedding. The new person must be the cousin, the one the Abbey belongs to. She’s the image of Lady Quellyn—Mrs. Raymond, I think they called her. No wonder her little girl is like the twins!’

Later in the afternoon Rosamund brought the party of schoolgirls and showed them quickly round the Abbey. There were two more with them now, another senior, with black hair in two long plaits, and a junior, with yellow curls, who seemed to be the chum of Daffodil.

Benney kept out of sight again, but she heard the voices, and watched them as they stood talking and laughing on the garth.

‘The younger one’s quite like Rosamund, and they call her Rosalie. And the older one is Rhoda. They must be the bridesmaid cousins,’ she decided. ‘Maidlin says all the girls of the family have Rose names. I’m glad to have seen them.’

That evening Jim came, as usual, and his disappointment when Maidlin did not appear was obvious. He reported that Mrs. Bennett was definitely stronger and had asked about Benney, and had been glad and interested to hear where she was, and that she was so happy. She had sent her love, and the doctor promised that if all went well Benney should see her for two minutes in a few days.

‘I’ll come for you and bring you back here,’ Jim said.

‘But I can’t go on staying here! I’d like to, of course, but I’ve only been asked to stay for the wedding, and that’s to-morrow. I’ll have to go home, Jim.’

Jim’s face grew gloomy. ‘Perhaps they’ll ask you to stay on?’ And he said good night and drove away, looking disturbed. If Benney went back to

town, what hope had he of seeing Maidlin again?

Benney sat just outside her door, as gloomy and disturbed as her brother. 'Jimmy doesn't come here to see me, that's quite certain!' she said to herself.

Maidlin came across the garth, and Benney sprang up and went to meet her. 'You're just too late to see Jim, Maid.'

'Oh, well, that doesn't matter! He doesn't come to see me.'

Maidlin spoke without looking at Benedicta, so she did not see the meaning gleam in the brown eyes; she had seen Jim standing at the gate to say good-bye, and had deliberately gone back into the Hall grounds for ten minutes, to give him time to go away; but she did not mean Benney to know that. 'I came to warn you that Rosamund may come into the Abbey, quite late to-night, and to ask you to take no notice, if she does,' she went on. 'You sometimes look out at the garth during the night, don't you? If you see Ros, don't think she's the ghost of Lady Jehane, haunting the ruins and looking for her jewels.'

Benney laughed; she knew the story of Jehane and her jewels, and of their finding by Jen and Joan.

'I won't think Rosamund is a ghost. Mustn't I speak to her?'

'No, leave her alone. She may not come, but if she does it will be to say good-bye to the Abbey, and she won't want anybody. She has been here, off and on, for ten years, just as I have, and she's feeling sorry to be going away. She may come in for the last time, to wander about alone.'

'How you all love the Abbey, don't you?'

Maidlin agreed. 'Joy has been very lucky, and she knows it. To be married twice, and not to have to go away, is much more than she could ever have hoped for. She's so very happy to be able to bring up the twins here.'

'She said something like that to me yesterday,' Benney said. 'I saw Mrs. Raymond to-day, and the little girl who's the image of the twins. Mrs. Raymond's had to go away from the Abbey, although it really belongs to her.'

'Jansy is like the twins, isn't she? Joan and Joy aren't quite so much alike, now that Joy has cut off her hair; Joan still has hers, in big plaits round her head, and it makes a difference between them; they used to be the image of one another. But I suppose you saw Joan with her hat on. They don't live very far away, just down in Sussex, near the Rose and Squirrel tea-shop. Did you see the girls from the school?'

'Yes, I was in the toy-shop when they came, and Rosamund brought them into the Abbey.—Maidlin!'

Maidlin turned to her in surprise. 'What's the matter?'

Benedicta had made up her mind, and the trouble came out in a spate of words. ‘Maidlin, it’s about Jim. You said he didn’t come to see you. I’ve been watching, and I’m afraid he does. And—and he doesn’t really mean it; there’s somebody else. It isn’t fair to you; you ought to know.’

Maidlin’s usually pale face filled with startled colour, and her great black eyes fairly blazed. ‘You mean—Jim is just amusing himself—playing about, and trying to make me think——! I’ll never speak to you or him again!’

And she was gone, flying across the garth and down the passage.

Benney stood rooted to the spot in stunned dismay. Then, with a gasp of distress, she shot after Maidlin down the tresant tunnel and through the Abbot’s garden.

The door to the Hall was open. Maidlin ran through and pulled it after her.

Benney flung herself through the opening, just on her heels. ‘Maidlin! Listen to me!—oh!’

The door crashed on her, and she pushed it back and stood ruefully rubbing her left shoulder and elbow. ‘Oh, Maid, you pig!’

Maidlin stopped in her wild flight and stared at her. ‘Did I hurt you? You shouldn’t have rushed in.’

‘You’ll hurt me more, if you speak like that.’ Benney seized her chance. ‘Maidlin, I never meant what you thought. Do be fair and let me finish! Jim’s fearfully in earnest about you; he isn’t playing. But Gail came first, and he’s really fond of her. You’ve made him forget; he’s off his head about you! But some day he’ll find Gail again, and then I don’t know what will happen. He’s been keen on her for a year. He isn’t playing about with you; that’s the trouble. He thinks you’re the most marvellous girl he’s ever seen—for the time; but if he finds Gail——’

Maidlin came up to her, her wild rage gone. ‘Gail? Did you say Gail? But I know Gail; could there be two? Gail what? What’s her whole name?’

Benedicta stared at her. ‘Gail Alwyn; Abigail Ann Alwyn—the great composer’s grand-daughter. Oh, Maid! Do you really know where she is?’

Maidlin’s eyes blazed again, but this time with laughter. ‘Come back into the Abbey. I’ll tell you all about Gail. Why, Benney, she’s coming to the wedding to-morrow! We’ll give her back to Jim, and everything will be all right!’

CHAPTER XIII

THE TUCK-SHOP LADY

‘Oh, tell me what you mean!’ Benney cried. ‘How can you know her? Where is she?’

Maidlin dropped on the old stone seat among the Abbot’s wallflowers and daffodils. ‘I’m sorry I lost my temper! It’s a part of me that flares up now and then. You must forgive me, Benedicta. I had no right to be so angry without waiting to make sure. Did I hurt your arm?’

‘Bother my arm! No, but you terrified me. I didn’t know you could be like that.’

‘You don’t know me very well, then! I’ve a horrible temper. I’ve seen Jim’s face, and I’ve been so bothered, Benney; I haven’t known what to do. I saw him with you just now, and I went back and waited till he’d gone. I’m four years older than Jim; I feel like his aunt or his elder sister, as if he needed somebody to take care of him. Gail would do it beautifully; she’s just the person to mother somebody, and she’s pining to keep house. She doesn’t want a public career. We’ll marry them in a year or two, Benedicta, and she’ll make a man of Jimmy.’

‘I’ve always thought she would,’ Benney cried. ‘But Sir Ivor Quellyn sent Jim away, and Gail disappeared, and we haven’t been able to find her.’

‘I’ll talk to Ivor! He won’t feel so badly about it now that Gail’s career is given up. But tell me one thing, Benney, for I don’t understand. Does Gail know about Jim? About how he feels, I mean? I’ve seen more of her than anybody; we went abroad together for a week last summer; and she never said a word about Jim to me. I don’t believe she ever thought about him. She was just a schoolgirl—well, a girl who had just left school; only sixteen and a bit. She had all sorts of plans for her life—cooking, nursing, or looking after babies; all kinds of jolly things. But Jim didn’t come into any of them; she hadn’t any idea of being Mrs. James Bennett—I’m sure of that.’

‘Mrs. James Bennett! My aunt, how funny it sounds! No, she didn’t know. But we knew how Jim felt about her. Where is she, Maidlin? Did Sir Ivor Quellyn bring her here?’

‘He sent her here, to Joy’s Music School, in the village, where Cecily Perowne lives when she’s with us. It was the natural thing to do; her grandfather asked Ivor to be her guardian, and he couldn’t keep her with him in town; he hadn’t a house to take her to. But he was friendly with Joy,

though they weren't engaged then; so he asked Joy to have Gail in her Music School.'

'So that's what happened to her! We've wondered ever since her grandfather died; we only knew she'd disappeared.'

'How well did you know her?' Maidlin asked. 'She spoke of friends in town, but she never said much.'

'Jim had a chum in the Quellyn orchestra, whose sister was at school with Gail Alwyn. Their house was almost the only place where she was allowed to go; her grandfather was terribly strict with her, and it was nothing but music all day long. She had to practise for hours; I wondered she didn't get fed up.'

'She did,' Maidlin commented. 'She arrived here determined not to go in for music as a career, and ready to fight Ivor himself on the subject. Did Jim meet her at his friend's house?'

Benney nodded. 'He told me he said to himself—"That's my girl!" But he couldn't say it to her.'

'I hope not! Does your mother know her?'

'Jim saw her a good many times, and once Mother and I met her at a tea-place in town, with Jim and the friend and the sister, after they'd been to an afternoon concert. We asked Gail and her chum to tea, and we all liked her. Mother said that when she was a little older she'd be very good for Jimmy. And then Alwyn died and Gail disappeared.'

'And she came to us. It is queer, isn't it? But what's troubling me is—will Jim be good for Gail, Benney? Gail's a dear and a very fine girl.'

'Oh, but Jimmy will be all right when he grows up!' Benney said eagerly. 'He wants something to work for and look forward to, that's all. Since he lost Gail he's been all at sea, messing about and undecided about anything. If he knew Gail would marry him some day, even in three years, when she'll be twenty, he'd buck up and show her he was worth while.'

'He'd have to, if I know Gail,' Maidlin remarked. 'She won't have anything to do with a slacker.'

'Jim's not really a slacker. Where is Gail now? Why haven't I seen her, if she's here?'

'She isn't here now. She stayed with us for some time; she had a little accident—well, she saved Elizabeth and Jen's Tony from a fire in a shed in the Manor garden, and burnt her hand in doing it. So we had to keep her till she was better, and by that time we knew how she felt about music, and that she was determined not to be a public pianist. One of her fingers didn't come quite right, and it will always be rather stiff, and she seized on that to prove to Ivor that she couldn't play in public and she must do something else. She'd had too much music; she loves it, but she wants other things as

well. Then Rosamund asked her to be her tuck-shop lady, at the cottage she was turning into a tuck-shop for the school near the Rose and Squirrel, her Sussex tea-shop, and Gail liked the idea. She's been in charge of the tuck-shop ever since last September, and she loves the work and the girls, and the girls love her too. She came to tea with us this afternoon, with Rosamund's aunts from the cottage, in the little car belonging to the married aunt, so that they could see the toy-shop, as Ros insists on calling her show; but they've gone back now. They'll come to the wedding to-morrow; we never thought that you might know Gail, of course.'

'How could you?' Benney agreed. 'Then I shall see her; I'm terribly glad about that.' She began to laugh. 'Shall we invite Jim and hide him in a corner, so that he'll see Gail and have a shock?'

'No, don't tell him,' Maidlin said quickly. 'It wouldn't be fair to either of them. No!' She sat thinking. 'I shall talk to Gail,' she said at last. 'She shan't be teased or frightened, and she isn't thinking of anything of this sort. She's quite happy selling sweets and ices to Rosalie and Daffodil and the rest. I shall see how she feels about it before we tell Jim she's here.'

Benedicta stole a look at her. 'Maid, you are a jolly good Camp Fire Guardian! You understand all about girls, and you know what to do.'

Maidlin flushed. 'Oh, I don't! But I know what I'd like myself, and I wouldn't like it to be taken for granted that I was waiting to jump into Jim's arms, when I had never thought of him in that way. And I'm sure Gail hasn't thought of it. After all, Benney, why should she give up her life to marry Jim, just because he wants it? He has to make her want it too. We'll give him the chance, but we must be fair to them both. It would be good for Jim, but Gail must decide whether it would be good for her. I'm very fond of her; she stood by me when I was in great trouble. I won't have her hurried or worried.'

'That's only fair.' Benney looked grave. 'But I hope she will want it. Jim would be dreadfully upset, if she turned him down. I've often thought that marrying was more fun for the man than the girl, Maidlin. He gets the person he wants to live with him and take care of his house, but if she's had any sort of job she has to give it all up, and her home, and everything. He doesn't.'

Maidlin laughed. 'I don't think that's the whole of it, Benedicta. But I do agree that the girl has to give up a lot. Look at Rosamund! She gives up her cottage and the life she had chosen, and starts out on a new big job, all to please Geoffrey. Of course, she loves Geoffrey; you must remember that makes a difference.'

'I suppose it does. I couldn't love anybody as much as that.'

‘Everyone feels like that till somebody comes along that they can love; I do! I don’t feel there’s anybody born who could make up to me for having to leave Joy and the twins and the Abbey, and Jen and her family, and my Camp Fire, and everything. Joy *has* been one of the lucky ones! She hasn’t had to give up anything. Of course, she lost Andrew, and it nearly killed her; but after a year or two, when she got over the shock, she settled down here in her old home with her babies and with all her friends round her, and her music came back, and though she missed Andrew dreadfully for years, there was a quiet sort of happiness all the time. And now that Ivor has come into her life, she’s radiantly, overflowingly happy again, and still she hasn’t had to give up her home or her friends.’

Benney assented. ‘She looks so happy. May I speak to Gail to-morrow?’

‘Of course you must; you’re an old friend. But don’t say anything about all this.’

‘Oh no, I won’t! Jim’s coming in the morning, to bring me a frock for the wedding. Shall I tell him I’ve found Gail?’

‘Wait a day or two,’ Maidlin advised. ‘We won’t have time for Jim to-morrow! It won’t do any harm to wait.’

‘Will Lady Jen be able to come?—Oh, Maid! What has happened?’ Benney cried, as a shadow fell on Maidlin’s face.

Maidlin’s hands knit together in distress. ‘*I don’t know*,’ she said, almost under her breath. ‘I don’t know how bad it is. Jen won’t tell us. She keeps putting us off. It’s what she would do, if there was bad news; she wouldn’t let it spoil the wedding. She has courage enough for six people, and she and Kenneth will bear it together, whatever it is.’

‘Is there bad news to-night?’ Benney faltered.

‘They had a specialist this afternoon for consultation,’ Maidlin said unsteadily. ‘We know that much. Jen rang up and told Joy, and asked us not to go to the house and not to tell Rosamund, if we could help it. She won’t be able to come to-morrow, but she wants to see Ros after the ceremony is over. We told Joan before she left, and she said she was going to the Manor, whatever Jen said. There’s always been something very deep and real between Jen and Joan, ever since they were at school together; Joan was a senior, and the May-Queen, when Jen first went to school, and Jen was Joan’s Maid of Honour till she became Queen herself, and she has always been devoted to Joan. Joan can do more for her than Joy or any of us. Just as I left the house Joan rang up to say she was sending Jansy home in the car with the man and she was going to stay with Jen; Kenneth had asked her to stay. And then she said that the specialist is coming again, early to-morrow morning, and if he decides that an operation is necessary they’ll have to do it at once.’

‘Oh—Maidlin! On the wedding-day?’

Maidlin bit her lips fiercely. ‘To wait a day might risk Rosemary’s life. Of course, I know it’s a very ordinary operation and thousands of people have it safely, and the doctors are quite used to it. Probably once it’s over Rosemary will get well very quickly. But I know, too, how horribly Jen dreads it, and how she hates the thought of its being done to her baby; and Rosemary is only three and not very strong. I’m afraid, Benney; we’re all afraid. But we can’t do anything to help.’

Benney clung to her. ‘Mrs. Joan will help. I’m glad she’s there!’

‘Oh, so am I. What we have to do,’ Maidlin said, steadying herself with an effort, ‘is to put it out of our minds, for Rosamund’s sake, until the wedding is over. If there was anything we could do, it would be different. But as Joan is there, Jen doesn’t need us, even Joy; and to go asking for news, or ringing up, would only worry Kenneth. We shan’t have time to think to-morrow, and it’s just as well. The trouble is, not one of us could tell Rosamund a lie, and look at her while we did it; we’re too fond of her, and she’d know, if we tried to cheat her. If she asks us straight out, we’ll have to tell her. But I don’t believe she’ll ask; she’s so very matter-of-fact and sensible, and she knows she has to go through with it now. When she says: “How is Rosemary?” Joy says: “Not too well,” and Ros says no more. She knows, Benney.’

‘She’s being brave, too,’ Benney said. ‘You’re all being brave.’

‘There’s nothing else to do. It wouldn’t help Jen, if we spoiled Rosamund’s wedding. We’re all being very cheerful, and to-morrow we shall be very busy. When it’s all over, Jen will tell us what has happened. Good night, Benedicta! Don’t take any notice of Rosamund, if she comes and wanders round the garth!’

‘Oh, I won’t! I know she wants to say good-bye.’

‘I am so glad we’ve found out about Gail. I won’t bang the gate on you this time!’ and Maidlin went back to take up the burden of forced cheerfulness that overhung the Hall.

Rosamund, a little graver than was right and natural, asked almost no questions.

‘Rosemary?’ she looked at Joy next morning.

‘Not a very good night,’ said Joy, turning from the telephone.

Rosamund glanced at her face and said no more.

CHAPTER XIV THE MESSENGER

‘You know the arrangements for to-morrow,’ Maidlin had said, as she left Benedicta at the Abbey gate. ‘Rosamund will come to the church at twelve o’clock. If you go down early, you’ll see everything; there’ll be plenty going on. After the wedding we have lunch for the Earl and Countess at the Hall, but we can’t ask everybody, and Ros begged so hard to have only family that we shall be quite a small party. We have to entertain her new relations—quite a number of them; and a few very old friends. For everybody else there will be lunch in the Village Hall, and I hope you’ll have found Gail by that time, so that you can go with her. The schoolgirls, who are the Guard of Honour, will be there, and our own Guides, and the whole village, I expect, and heaps of old school friends. You’ll be all right in that crowd, and they’ll be much jollier than we shall, for they won’t know there’s trouble at the Manor. Rumours will be flying about, but Jen has been very careful not to let the whole of it be known. You won’t be lonely, will you, Benedicta?’

‘Not a scrap. May I really go to the Village Hall? It would be terribly dull to have lunch with Mrs. Watson! But I’m not an old friend, am I?’

‘Oh, I think you are! Didn’t we meet two years ago?’ Maidlin’s dark eyes laughed at her as she turned away.

Jim came early, bringing the dress-box which Mrs. Bennett’s maid had packed, and hoping that Maidlin would steal a few quiet moments in the Abbey before the excitement of the day began. He saw only Benedicta, and went away disappointed, and Benney let him go gladly, because it was so very hard not to burst out, as she longed to do—‘Oh, Jimmy, I’ve found Gail for you!’

She kept it in, but saw him go with relief, and then ran to open the box and hang her white frock over the bed.

It was only nine o’clock. In spite of Maidlin’s hint she felt it would be useless to go down to the church before eleven.

‘I should look silly, hanging about all dressed up, as early as this! I shall go for a walk; I haven’t been out of the grounds since I came,’ she decided. ‘I’ll dress when I come back.’

She took her coat and her brown beret and set out, up the road and along towards the entrance to the Hall. A car dashed past her and up the drive between the lines of beautiful beeches.

‘That was a florist’s van. How busy they must be! I wonder how Rosamund is feeling? In three hours she’ll be the Countess of Kentisbury. I shall go on and keep out of the way. Here’s a lane leading towards the hills; that will be well away from all the fuss!’

She turned up the cart track and wandered under arching trees, looking for violets and primroses in the hedgerows.

‘Of course, I *know* how they’re all feeling! They can’t quite forget Lady Jen. I wish I could ask somebody how Rosemary is this morning!’ she thought.

She came to a break in the hedge, where on each side a small swing gate showed a path which cut across the lane. Benney stood looking in both directions.

‘I wonder where it goes to? It comes out of the trees here, but on the other side it’s a sort of park.’ And she leaned on the gate and gazed. ‘There’s water over there—a lake; how jolly! I wish I could see it better, but it looks private. Would anybody mind if I just went along the path to see the water? I wish there was somebody I could ask!’

There was no one in sight. Her desire grew too much for her, and she slipped through the gate and ran down the path to the lake. Then, finding the place deserted, she wandered round the sheet of water, gazing at the island, on which grew one old oak tree.

‘There’s another little gate, leading away among trees, and I think there’s a house. I’d better go,’ and she turned towards the lane again. ‘Oh——!’

She stopped, with a cry of dismay, for someone was coming through the swing gate by which she must go. Then she ran to meet her, with another cry, which was at first of joy and then changed to consternation.

‘Lady Quellyn! Lady Joy!—Oh, no! It isn’t Lady Joy!’

Joan Raymond looked down at her. ‘Are you the girl who is living in my Abbey?’

‘Yes, and I do love it. Thank you just terribly much! I know I’m trespassing,’ Benney apologised, ‘but I haven’t done any harm. I only went to look at the water. Where am I? Is there a house over there? I suppose this is private, isn’t it?’

Joan gave her a searching look. ‘You’re in the Manor grounds. Lady Marchwood’s house is just beyond those trees. This is the path that leads straight to Lady Quellyn’s house and the Abbey.’

‘Oh! I didn’t understand. How jolly for them to be so near! It is next door, as Maidlin said!’

‘You weren’t going to the house?’ Joan looked at her again. ‘You really didn’t know where you were?’

‘No! Why should I go? I haven’t been asked. I wouldn’t trouble Lady Jen just now.—Oh, Mrs. Raymond! Can’t you tell me about Rosemary? I want to know so terribly badly!’

Joan smiled very faintly. ‘I apologise, Benedicta. I suspected you of prowling round, trying to pick up gossip. I am really sorry. I see you had no thought of intruding.’

She stood, gazing past Benney at the lake, with something so deep and pitiful in her face that Benney drew close and seized her hand in fear.

‘Oh, Mrs. Joan! Rosemary isn’t—hasn’t——’ she whispered.

‘No, not that,’ Joan said quickly. ‘We ’phoned to London early this morning and the surgeon came at once. He is going to operate on Rosemary at eleven o’clock. I went to tell Joy quietly; she mustn’t have a shock to-day.’

‘Oh—poor Lady Jen! She was so much afraid of it,’ Benney half sobbed.

‘She’s worn out. We had a dreadful night,’ Joan said quietly. ‘I’m glad I was here to help. We pray that Rosemary will come through, but for a few hours no one can say, and for a few days they’ll be very anxious. Now, Benedicta, you weren’t meant to know; nobody is to know until the wedding is over. I managed to see Joy alone; she won’t tell anyone. I rang her up and asked her to meet me in the garden; Rosamund doesn’t know I have been there. You must keep it to yourself. Rosemary is in a dangerous condition; the next few hours will be very critical, and it would never do if Ros or Maidie understood. To-day is quite trying enough for both of them.’

‘For Maidlin?’ Benney asked puzzled. ‘I know it’s difficult for Rosamund to say good-bye, even to be a Countess.’

‘It’s very hard for Maidlin,’ Joan remarked. ‘She’s losing Rosamund, and they have been close friends for ten years. Ros is going to a new and larger life, but Maid will be left alone. She feels a little lonely, now that Joy has married again, and she’ll miss Rosamund, even though Ros hasn’t been living at home lately. Maid has always felt she might come back; she’ll never do it now.’

Benney gripped Joan’s hand and looked up at her. ‘I say, Mrs. Raymond! How marvellous Maidlin is! She’s never said a word about that to me; not one word about her own side of it. She’s only talked about Rosamund being brave and going away. Maid’s terribly brave, Mrs. Joan!’

‘What a dreadful expression, Benedicta! But Maid is brave.’

‘Lady Jen is the bravest, because she has the worst thing to bear,’ Benney ventured. ‘Mrs. Joan, I shall be thinking about Rosemary all through the wedding. Have they sent for a good doctor?’

‘The best they could hear of, Benedicta. I wonder—would you like to help?’

‘Oh, Mrs. Joan! Is there anything I could do?’ Benney cried, aflame with eagerness. ‘I felt so helpless. If I could do anything at all——!’

‘We all feel so helpless. But I believe you could do rather a big thing for Rosamund and all of us; not for Jen, I’m afraid, though she’ll be glad to hear about it afterwards. Are you very anxious to see Rosamund married? You don’t know her very well, do you?’

‘No, but I love her!’ Benney looked puzzled. ‘Tell me, Mrs. Joan. Do you want me to miss the wedding?’

‘That’s just it. I want somebody to stay near the telephone while they’re in the church, to get the very latest news. Rosamund will ask as soon as ever she dares, and Joy will want to be able to tell her. We shall know how the child has come through the actual operation, just about the time the ceremony will be over. If I could ’phone to somebody—to you, perhaps—you could take a message to Joy as they come out of the church, and it might be a relief to them all.’

‘Oh!’ Benney’s face blazed with eagerness. ‘Oh, let me be the messenger! Where is the nearest ’phone? I’ll sit beside it and wait till you ring! I want to see Rosamund as a bride, but I’ll do that—I shall see her arrive. Then I’ll run to the ’phone and wait for the message. I don’t care a scrap if I don’t hear her say—“I will”! I’m quite sure she’ll say it properly!’

‘I’m sure she will.’ Joan smiled at her eagerness. ‘The ’phone is in the Village Hall, near the door; any of the people who are preparing the lunch will show you. Say you’re waiting for a message from the Manor. Are you sure you don’t mind?’

‘I’m proud!’ Benney glowed with joy. ‘Oh, Mrs. Joan! I hope it will be good news!’

‘We all hope so. I couldn’t ask Mary—and they’d have missed her. I thought of little Cecily Perowne, but she has a great love for Ros, who found her mother for her. Cecily has come here especially for the wedding.’

‘Oh, don’t spoil it for her! I’m glad to do it. I’ll be waiting at the ’phone from twelve o’clock, Mrs. Joan.’

‘Have a pencil and paper; you might be able to slip a note into Joy’s hand, when it would be difficult to speak to her.’

‘That’s a good idea. Oh, I’m so glad I met you! I’ll love to help. I’d better race home and change my frock. Oh, Mrs. Joan, do send me good news to tell them!’

‘I hope I shall. Thank you, from us all, Benedicta! Now I must go and stand by Jen. It’s a terrible day for her and Kenneth.’

‘I’m glad she has you to stand by her,’ Benney called, as she turned back to the lane leading to the Abbey.

CHAPTER XV THE MESSAGE

Someone was crossing the garth; a girl with short brown wavy hair. Benedicta saw her through her lancet window, dropped her brush, caught up her hat, and ran out after her.

‘Gail! Gail Alwyn! How marvellous to see you again!’

Gail turned to greet her. ‘Benney Bennett! Maidlin has been telling me. Isn’t it odd we should meet here, in the Abbey? How’s your mother to-day?’

‘Oh, much better! Isn’t it joyful? She’s really getting on well now. They’ve been terribly good to me here, Gail.’

‘They’re terribly good to everybody. I can tell you they were good to me. I say! Why don’t you wear white frocks every day? It makes your hair look quite yellow!’

Benney laughed. ‘I couldn’t be bothered with white all the time. You’ll have to put up with me with white hair—it’s called lint-white, and it’s very beautiful! Gail, tell me! Didn’t you save Elizabeth from a fire? I want to hear about it, and all about your tuck-shop.’

‘Let’s go down to the village,’ said Gail. ‘The girls are there; I came in the bus with them. We had a coach, and we aren’t going home till after tea.’

‘Why haven’t they broken up? I’m having holidays.’

‘They stop for a fortnight after Easter. You’ve heard how ill Rosemary Marchwood is?’ Gail asked abruptly. ‘Isn’t it desperately sad for Lady Jen? I’m afraid she won’t be able to come to the church.’

Benedicta shot a look at her, feeling the burden of her added knowledge. She would have liked to share the suspense with Gail, but she kept faith with Joan.

‘I’m afraid she won’t. Perhaps Rosemary will be better soon. I haven’t seen her; have you?’

‘Oh, yes! I stayed at the Manor for a night or two. She’s a darling, but not like the others at all.’

‘Lady Jen told me she was a little gipsy. Are they very worried about her at the Hall?’

‘They aren’t saying much,’ Gail said. ‘They’re all being terribly busy, dressing Rosamund and answering the ’phone and taking in telegrams and flowers, and nobody mentions Rosemary. But at the back of their minds they’re very bothered.’

Benney agreed. 'It's the only way to do. We'd better not talk about her either. Will you tell me who people are? I don't know anybody but the family and some of the Camp Fire Girls.'

'I'll tell you those I know. But I don't know their old school friends, of course.'

As they went down the lane towards the village, the clear high notes of a pipe met them.

'Oh! Is that Cecily Perowne?' cried Benney.

'It's "Haste to the Wedding," anyway!' Gail exclaimed. 'Come on!'

'I know it. Are they dancing?—Oh! Oh, but how jolly! Oh, if only——!'

'I know, but you mustn't think about it. They don't know about Rosemary. We've got to pretend to be jolly too,' Gail said vigorously. 'Do you dance? Then come and join on at the end!'

'Oh! Oh, look at those girls!' Benney shouted. 'Oh, Gail! Who are they? Is *that* your school uniform?'

Long lines of dancers stretched towards the maypole in the middle of the green. Cecily, with uncovered red hair blowing in the wind, stood on a tub beside the pole and piped the tune. Gail caught Benney's hand and dragged her to the end of a line.

'Don't stand and stare! I'll tell you later. You must dance "Haste to the Wedding" for Rosamund!'

Benney danced obediently, but her eyes were on the schoolgirls, and she kept breaking out into questions.

'Where is your school, Gail? What's it called? Why do they wear those smocks? They look marvellous!'

The eighteen girls were dressed alike in loose brown 'round-frocks,' smocked across the breast, brown breeches and boots, and soft brown hats. Most of them had short hair, but Benney saw Robin's long brown plait flying; then she recognized some of the others she had seen the day before—curly-headed Daffodil and her older cousin Tamzine, and 'Sonny,' with the yellow mop of hair.

'Who's she? I saw her yesterday. What's her real name?' she begged of Gail.

'Sonny Raymond—Sonia. Mrs. Raymond, Lady Joy's cousin, is her aunt.'

'Oh! I know Mrs. Raymond,' and Benedicta was sober for a few minutes, for it was just eleven o'clock. The thought of what was happening at the Manor chilled her heart and, when Cecily began to whistle "The Old Mole" and the crowd made up sets of six, she refused Gail's invitation to join in.

‘I can’t—not this one. I know it, but I can’t dance just now. I’ll tell you why later.’

‘Oh well! I’m not keen to dance them all. Come and peep into the church. The flowers are lovely.’

‘Tell me about those girls!’ Benney pleaded, trying to forget the clock on the Village Hall.

‘There are nineteen of them, but Rhoda and Rosalie Kane are bridesmaids, so our gardening mistress, Miss Durrant, is making up the ninth couple. She was to have been married herself at Christmas, but it was put off till the summer, and as the new mistress who was to take her place wasn’t ready to come, Miss Durrant stayed on for another term. She’s very bucked to be at Rosamund’s wedding; they’re great pals.’

‘But the girls?’ Benney was not interested in Miss Durrant. ‘Where is the school, Gail?’

‘Wood End, in Sussex. It’s a branch of Cliff End School, near Brighton, for girls who want to specialise in gardening and all sorts of country stunts.’

‘But that’s my new school!’ Benedicta gave a shout, and forgot even Jen and Rosemary. ‘I’m going there! I thought the girls looked like the pictures of the uniform I’ve seen! I haven’t got my outfit yet. Wood End is where I’m going in May! Oh, Gail, what fun!’

‘That’s great,’ Gail said, laughing. ‘You shall come to my tuck-shop for ices.’

‘I love the uniform! I shall adore wearing a smock and breeches!’ Benney exulted.

‘They all love it. Come and speak to them, when this dance is over.’

‘Come and join in!’ Tamzine said hospitably, when Gail had explained. ‘Come and be a Wood Ender at once. There’s my young cousin Daffodil; her chum, Rosalie Kane, is a bridesmaid, so she’s lost her partner. Join up with her for “Christchurch Bells.” Rosamund taught this to us last term; we had the most marvellous classes with her, on the lawn. Where’s my Sonny?’

Presently the school surrounded Cecily, demanding ‘The Ribbon Dance,’ and produced ribbons of crimson and emerald, gold and deep blue from the pockets of their breeches.

‘That will look lovely! I’m going to watch,’ Benney said to Gail, and they stood together as the coloured arches went over and under and the ribbons floated out as the lines went round in the ‘cast.’

‘Yes, it’s rather wonderful,’ Gail agreed. ‘They’ll make an arch for Rosamund presently. Daffodil wanted them to bring their spades and hoes and rakes to make the arches for her, but the others decided that ribbons would be prettier as well as safer.—Look, Benney! Here comes the Earl,’ as a car drove up to the church door. ‘Let’s go and watch people arrive.’

They left the dancers and joined the crowd outside the church, and Gail kept murmuring information to the interested Benedicta.

‘The Earl’s been an invalid all his life, but he’s heaps better since his engagement to Rosamund. He’s almost well now, though I suppose he won’t ever be very strong.—That’s Mrs. Everett, who started the dancing that made them all friends and May-Queens when they were at school. She came to the Rose and Squirrel once, when I was helping.—Here come Jansy and John Raymond; yes, aren’t they like the twins? Where is Mrs. Raymond? I hope she isn’t ill.’

‘No, she’s keeping Lady Jen company.’

‘Oh! How jolly for Lady Jen! But she’ll come to the wedding, won’t she?’

‘Oh, look!’ Benney avoided an answer. ‘Here come the bridesmaids! What marvellous frocks! And lovely flowers! Doesn’t Maidlin look pretty?’

‘She’s white with excitement,’ said Gail. ‘And she’s feeling bad about losing Rosamund. Rhoda Kane looks jolly, doesn’t she?—the one with two long dark plaits. Her brother was the little Earl, who was killed on his motor-bike. She’s Lady Rhoda, of course. There’s Rosalie—the curly yellow one—trying to look serious. They don’t know about Rosemary Marchwood, of course.’

Benney glanced fearfully at the clock. It was almost twelve; surely the operation must be over! In a few minutes now she would know.

The Wood End girls came running, with flying ribbons, to take their places as the Guard of Honour. Tamzine tossed the end of her blue streamer to Sonny Raymond, and the coloured arches were formed, as a car drew up at the gate.

Rosamund, in her white robe and wearing Lady Verriton’s gift of pearls, came slowly and with great dignity under the ribbon canopy between the lines of khaki smocks, on Sir Ivor Quellyn’s arm. The procession was formed and disappeared into the church, the twins with immense gravity holding up the white train, while Maidlin, walking alone in front of Rhoda and Rosalie, kept a watchful eye on them.

The Wood End girls marched in and took the places reserved for them. Gail turned to look for Benedicta, but found her gone.

‘She must have slipped inside.’ And Gail followed the school and found a place by Tamzine and Sonia.

Benney was running wildly away from the church, while everyone else was crowding in. Sudden terror had seized her, and she was white and desperate.

‘Suppose it’s bad news? I’ve been so sure it would be good, and I’d be the one to relieve their minds. But suppose it’s the other way? I can’t bear it;

I must know! It must be all over by now!’

She had found out the position of the telephone long ago. She dashed into the little room where it stood, and was grasping the receiver when she checked herself.

‘No, I’ll wait. I’ll bear it somehow. The ’phone makes such a beastly row, and they’ll want the house quiet. I’ll wait for Mrs. Joan. But, oh—I want to know! Oh, Mrs. Joan, be quick!’

The next ten minutes were desperately hard. Time after time she put out her hand to ask the question and end the suspense, but every time she stopped herself.

‘Oh, Mrs. Joan, why don’t you ring? Oh, if you’d only tell me!’ she whispered to the unresponsive telephone.

The loud ring startled her when it came. She caught up the receiver. ‘Oh, Mrs. Joan! Is it you? What’s the news?’

‘Is that Benedicta? All well as yet. The op. is safely over, and as far as they can say at present it has been successful. But it was very urgent, a bad operation; the child would have died in a few hours, if it hadn’t been done.’

‘Oh, what a good thing they were brave and went through with it!’ Benney said brokenly. ‘How’s Lady Jen?’

‘Keeping up wonderfully, but very tired. Tell Lady Quellyn as soon as she comes out of the church, Benedicta. Write down this message: “12.15. Operation safely over. Rosemary doing well.” That will be enough; they know I’ll ring up as soon as they get back to the house.’

‘They’ll be just terribly grateful to you,’ said Benney.

‘They’ll be grateful to you,’ Joan rejoined. ‘Has it gone off well so far? Have you seen my John and Jansy?’

‘Yes, they’re here. Aren’t they like the twins? Isn’t it funny?’

‘I suppose it is,’ Joan agreed. ‘You needn’t hurry to the church, you know. They won’t come out for a few minutes yet. How did Rosamund look?’

‘Lovely. Very stately and dignified, and not a bit scared.’

Joan laughed. ‘A good description, I’m sure. I shall tell the Countess! And Maidie?’

‘Very pretty, but rather white, Mrs. Joan.’

‘I can understand that. I hope Elizabeth and Margaret were being good?’

‘They were, when I saw them. The Guard of Honour thrilled me!’

‘The Wood End girls? They look charming, don’t they?’

‘I’ll tell you later why they thrilled me,’ Benney said confidentially. ‘I want to go now. I mustn’t be late. They’ll be so glad to hear the news.’

‘Thank you from us all, for missing the wedding!’ Joan called.

Benney hung up the receiver and raced away. The danger was not over, she knew, and there must be hours, or even days, of anxiety still. But the news was as good as was possible, and she was on fire with eagerness to pass it on.

CHAPTER XVI KISSED BY A COUNTESS

As soon as the signing of the register and the first congratulations in the vestry were over, Rosamund turned to Joy.

‘Now, Joy, tell me about Rosemary!’

Joy faced her bravely. ‘Rose, they were operating at eleven o’clock.’

Rosamund caught her breath. ‘Oh—Joy!’ she wailed. ‘Oh, poor Jen! When shall we know?’

‘There will be a message waiting when we reach home. Joan is at the Manor, and she’ll ring up and tell us.’

‘Can’t we go quickly? I’ve been sure it was serious; I saw it in your face. But I knew I mustn’t ask. I can’t wait much longer.’

A small white figure wormed her way through the crowd of guests, and Joy found a note pressed into her hand. She looked down into Benney’s face.

‘Benedicta! What do you want here, just now?’

‘Read it!’ Benney whispered. ‘Oh, Lady Joy! Rosamund!—I mean Countess! It’s all right; Rosemary’s going to get better!’

Joy thrust the note into Rosamund’s hand. ‘Read it, Rose! Benedicta, how did that message come?’

‘To me. I was waiting on the ’phone, in the Village Hall. I met Mrs. Joan this morning, by chance, in the Manor grounds, and we arranged it. She knew you couldn’t wait till you went home.’

‘You blessed girl!’ Joy exclaimed. ‘Benedicta, have you ever been kissed by a Countess? Because you’re going to be—now!’

‘Benneyben, thank you more than I can say! You’ve given me my best wedding-present!’ and Rosamund bent and kissed her warmly.

‘I hope you’ll be very, very happy!’ Benney cried. ‘I know you will, and you look a lovely Countess! But I missed your wedding; I didn’t hear you say “I will”! I was sorry to miss it, Rosamund—or I suppose I must say “My Lady” now, mustn’t I?’

Rosamund laughed and reddened. ‘Oh, don’t begin yet! You’ll make me shy!—Geoffrey, take me away from the crowd, and I’ll tell you what it’s all about. We’ve been in such trouble, and I’ve had no chance to tell you.’

‘The little girl who was ill? Has it been serious?’ her husband asked anxiously, drawing her hand through his arm.

‘They operated for appendicitis this morning—an hour ago. The poor baby is only three. It’s safely over,’ Rosamund gave him the essential points in a hasty undertone. ‘I didn’t know about the operation; they didn’t tell me till five minutes ago. But I guessed it was serious. Now I can face the cheering multitude! I just felt I couldn’t, while I didn’t know. I’m sure all will be well now. Come on! Let’s get it over! I must go to see Jen before we start. I couldn’t go away without having spoken to her.’

‘Of course you shall see her. We have plenty of time.’

‘I helped to make the Countess look like that,’ Benney whispered to Joy, as the Earl led his wife through the church.

‘Yes, “Blessing”, you did. She looks happy now,’ Joy agreed.

‘May I tell other people?’

‘Yes, they may as well know now.’

The Guard of Honour had hurried out to their places and raised their ribbon arches. They cheered as Rosamund and Geoffrey passed below, and the bride gave them a laughing, radiant look.

While Joy and Sir Ivor and the bridesmaids waited for their cars to come, Joy hurriedly whispered the news to her husband and Maidlin.

Maidlin’s whole expression changed. The strained white look left her and she seemed to glow with joy.

‘Does Ros know? Oh, now we can be happy! Benney brought the news? Couldn’t we take her home with us? We’d have room for one more little one!’

‘If she’d like it, bring her, by all means,’ said Joy. ‘She has done a big thing for us to-day.’

‘I don’t suppose she would like it.’ Maidlin looked for Benedicta, found her in the crowd with Gail, and called to her to come.

Benney flushed when she received the invitation. ‘I’d rather not, Maid. Thank you terribly much, but I should be shy with all your posh titled people, Lady Verriton and Lady Rhoda and the rest. But there’s one thing I do want fearfully, Maid!’

‘I’ll do it, if I can, Benedicta.’

‘I want to know how Rosemary goes on. There’s to be dancing on the green. People wouldn’t want to dance if—if she wasn’t so well, and I know she’s not out of danger yet. They don’t know, but if they heard afterwards that they’d been dancing while—well, they wouldn’t like it, Maid. You’ll have the very latest news. Couldn’t somebody ring me up at the Village Hall at certain times? At half-past one, and half-past two?’

‘And half-past three. I’ll see that it’s done, Benney. I’ll come myself to the ’phone, if I can; you shall have the very latest bulletins. We owe that much to you.’

‘Oh, good! Splendid!’ Benney exulted. ‘I’ll be waiting to hear your ring. That’s marvellous, Maid!’

Maidlin nodded, and went to join Rhoda and Rosalie and the twins in their car.

‘Who’s the girl? What is it all about?’ Rhoda Kane asked.

‘That’s Aunt Benedicta,’ said Elizabeth.

‘Aunt Benneyben,’ cried Margaret. ‘Lives in the Abbey, she does.’

‘She brought us good news. We’ve been in great trouble, but we didn’t tell you,’ and Maidlin told the story.

Benney seized Gail and pulled her out of the crowd.

‘I can tell you now; they said I might. There was an operation on Rosemary this morning—at eleven. I knew; that’s why I couldn’t dance. She’s come through it safely, and she’s doing well. Oh, Gail Alwyn! Think if it had been the other way!’

‘Oh, I say!’ Gail cried, startled. ‘Oh, how hard on them all! Tell me more about it, Benney!’

They retreated to the little garden of the Village Hall, and Benney told all she knew, while the smock-frocked schoolgirls surrounded Cecily and begged for more dances to fill in the waiting time till lunch was ready.

‘Give us “Put on Thy Smock on a Monday”, Cecily! Rosamund taught us that one!’

‘You must say “Lady Kentisbury” or “The Countess” now,’ cried Daffodil.

‘She wasn’t, when she taught us,’ Tamzine retorted.

‘I want to dance now, but I don’t know this one,’ Benney said to Gail.

‘We’ll ask for “Corn Rigs” next; that’s another Wood End favourite. Don’t know that either? Oh, I’ll pull you through! Come and practise the step!’

The news from the Manor spread round the crowd. Gail told the schoolgirls, to whom it meant little, as they did not know Jen or her family; they realised that there had been great anxiety, and that the trouble was now less serious, however, and they danced with greater joy than ever.

The village people and the friends gathering in the hall understood, and were full of sympathy and relief. Someone realised that Benney Bennett was the one who was to hear the first news, and Benedicta found all eyes anxiously upon her, to her mingled amusement and delight.

‘I feel quite the most important person here!’ she whispered to Gail, laughing and embarrassed. ‘Rather like the bride, in fact.’

‘They’re all so terribly fond of Lady Jen,’ said Gail. ‘When is the next bulletin?’

‘One-thirty. I shall be late for lunch.’

She was waiting in the 'phone-box quite five minutes too soon, conscious that the whole crowd of guests had seen her go in and would have liked to be with her.

'Doing well, Benedicta.' It was Maidlin's voice. 'The doctor is very pleased. Jen is resting, but wants to see Rosamund about four. They'll drive to the Manor before they start. Joan is staying till to-morrow, and she'll give us the news regularly.'

'Oh, splendid! I say, Maid! They all know I'm talking to you. They're holding their breath!'

Maidlin laughed. 'Don't you feel very important?'

'Just bursting with swank. I must go and tell them.'

'Yes, go and relieve their minds,' and Maidlin rang off.

Benney burst into the hall. 'It's all right!' she cried to Gail, who was hovering nearest to the door. 'She's doing well; the doctor's very pleased; Lady Jen is resting.'

The news flew round. Somebody raised a cheer, and the room rang with the happy noise.

'Three cheers for Benney Bennett!' shouted Tamzine Trenow.

'I want my lunch. I'm starving,' Benney retorted.

'Come and sit with us and tell us more about it. Pretend you're a Wood-End, even if you haven't a smock!'

The hourly bulletins were good, and the party on the green was light-hearted. Everyone joined in; guests, Guides, village folk, and schoolgirls. When Cecily was tired, Margia Lane, a very old friend, produced her fiddle and took her place on the tub, and she in turn was relieved by Maribel Marchwood, who came from the family lunch at the Hall to do her share.

Dance followed dance, rounds and squares and longways sets. Benedicta slipped away to the telephone and brought back the latest news. The fiddle gave place to the pipe, and the pipe to the fiddle. The twins from the Hall had come in the car with Maribel, in charge of Nelly, their nurse, and they seized on John Raymond and fought for him, until Elizabeth agreed to have one dance with Jansy and the next with John.

Presently the Wood End girls discovered the four children, and Tamzine Trenow gave a shout. 'Four red-heads all just alike! Oh, no—one's in knickers! Come into our set, Red-heads! Do you know "Butterfly"?''

'Yes, thank you,' John stared at her smock. 'What are you, please?'

'Knew it a thousand years ago,—nearly,' said Margaret Marchwood. 'But we will dance with you, because you look so funny.'

'Twin, you are rude!' Elizabeth protested.

'She's rude. Called us Red-heads!'

‘Well, so we are,’ Jansy Raymond said cheerfully. ‘You’ll be called worse than that at school, Margaret-Twin.’

‘Dance with me, Margaret-Twin,’ said Sonia Raymond.

‘It’s Sonny!’ John and Jansy rushed at their cousin. ‘We never saw her dressed like that before!’

‘Of course it’s Sonny. The music’s started; don’t you want to dance?’

The twins and their cousins did want to dance, and went gaily up and down the line of khaki smocks and over and under in the arches.

Somebody gave a shout and made a rush for the roadway, and the car which held Rosamund and the Earl was surrounded by a cheering crowd. Rosamund, wearing a lavender travelling suit, was grave, for she had come straight from a brief, tense visit to Jen, when Jen, worn out with shock and suspense, had clung to her and cried out her relief and disappointment.

‘I’ve missed your wedding, Rosamund! After all these years of friendship!’

‘I missed you, Jenny-Wren. I knew you and Joan weren’t there, and all through the service I was terrified for fear of what it might mean. I asked as soon as ever I could; almost the first words I said to Joy! But Rosemary will get better now. Oh, Jen, what a good thing you had it done!’

‘We’d have lost her, they say. I’m glad it’s over. But—oh, Rose! My poor baby!’

‘She’ll soon be strong again. Kenneth says you were wonderful, and that you helped him to pull through.’

‘I was so sorry for Ken! He felt it dreadfully, and a man takes things so badly. I tried to help him. He helped me, too. Now, Rosamunda, you must go, dear. It was sweet of you to come. I’m sure you looked lovely, and I’ll always be sorry that I didn’t see you. I know you’re going to be very happy. Have a good holiday, Countess! You’ve worked hard lately.’

‘I’ll dress up for you when I come back; we’ll all be feeling jollier then. Do you remember how Joy couldn’t be at your wedding, Jenny-Wren?’

‘Don’t I? The twinnies were a week old. Were they good to-day?’

‘Oh, perfect! I believe they’re dancing “Butterfly” on the green with my schoolgirls. Benedicta Bennett has been getting hourly bulletins by ’phone and passing round the news. They weren’t going to dance unless Rosemary was doing well.’

‘The doctors seem satisfied. But I’ll never forget this morning, Rosamund!’

‘Neither shall I, Jen dear.’ And Rosamund was still sober as she rejoined Geoffrey in the car.

When the wave of schoolgirls and dancers surged around them she broke into laughter, however. Cecily began to pipe ‘Sellenger’s Round’, and the

crowd took the hint and became rings, and danced with the bridal car as a maypole. Then they made room for it to pass, and Rosamund and her husband drove away, waving their hands till they were out of sight.

‘What a marvellous wedding!’ cried Daffodil Trenow.

‘In spite of the baby’s illness,’ Sonny Raymond added.

‘Where have the Earl and Countess gone for their honeymoon?’ Benedicta turned to Gail. ‘It can’t be a secret, because they’ll want news of Rosemary.’

‘They’re going to London to-night and then on to Scotland by car. The Earl has what he calls a small place by the side of a loch, somewhere in Argyllshire; Rosamund says it’s probably a small castle! They’ll have a few weeks there and then come home to Kentisbury. She didn’t want to live at the Castle; she says it fills the landscape. I’ve seen it, and it is huge! But she’s discovered that their own part of it is quite cosy and homelike, so she’s going to try to forget the rest and leave the State Apartments in the background. Lady Verriton, Rhoda’s mother, used to live there, and it was Rhoda’s home, but they’ve gone to Verriton House now.’

‘Didn’t they hate turning out? I wonder they’re so fond of Rosamund.’

‘They weren’t at first. But that’s a long story. Come and dance till tea-time! We’re going back in our bus after tea, but I’m coming to the Hall soon. Maidlin has some plan, but she hadn’t time to say any more. She’ll send the car for me, and she’ll tell me the rest when I get here.’

‘I wonder,’ said Benedicta to herself, as they joined in a ring for ‘Gathering Peascods’, ‘whether Maidlin’s plan has anything to do with our Jimmy?’

CHAPTER XVII

GAIL GROWS UP

'Somebody you know is looking for you, Benney Bennett!' Gail called, as she led Elizabeth Marchwood down the middle of the set in 'We won't go Home till Morning.'

Benedicta, clapping hands with Jansy Raymond, glanced round with interest, and during her next 'swing' discovered a determined-looking brother only a few yards away, staring with eager eyes at Gail.

'My aunt! Jim—come to see if Maidlin's anywhere about, and he's found Gail instead! It isn't me Jimmy's looking at!' Benney murmured, as she joined Gail and Elizabeth in the next 'hands-across'.

Jim looked as if he might break into the lines and carry Abigail Ann Alwyn away. He held himself in tightly; it was evident to both him and Benney that Gail was unconscious that his presence had anything to do with herself. He was just Benney's brother, come to have a look at the wedding crowd.

The dance ended, and Gail and Benedicta bowed to their partners, who bobbed in return. 'Come and have an ice, Ben,' Gail began.

'Where did you come from? Where have you been? Why did you go away? Did Benney know you were here?' Jim was at Gail's elbow and his words fairly tumbled out.

Gail turned to him in astonishment. Then, at the look in his eyes as he gazed at her hungrily, amazement and unbelief dawned in her own. 'Oh! Why—what——' she stammered.

Benney watched her face in eager excitement. 'I never saw anybody grow up under my eyes before,' she told Maidlin later, 'but it happened then. Gail knew, and I saw she knew, and she was glad, though she'd never dreamt of it a moment before. And she grew up, all in a second!'

To Gail, with no relations in the world, though she had found plenty of friends, it was wonderful that a man should look at her in that eager way; and Jimmy Bennett was a man to her, though he had seemed a boy to Maidlin. Gail had faced the future with courage and was prepared to seek training and earn her own living; but Jim's look suggested new possibilities, in which she would not have to stand alone. In the last few months she had seen married happiness in the case of Joy and Jen, and joyous anticipation of marriage in Rosamund. She was much more ready than Benedicta had been

to admit that there might be 'something in it', where marriage was concerned.

'We've looked for you everywhere. Why did you go away? Where have you been?' Jim demanded.

Benney tugged at his arm. 'We'll tell you all about it. Come and have drinks in a garden! There are drinks in most of the gardens, and ices. Come and treat Gail and me. No, I didn't know until last night. I haven't been hiding Gail from you! I hadn't the slightest idea, till Maidlin said Gail would be at the wedding.'

She shot a keen look at her brother as she uttered Maidlin's name, and under her eyes he coloured.

'Let's see about those drinks!' he stammered.

'Go and find us a table! They'll all be bagged. We'll come after you.' Benedicta took command of the situation, since Gail seemed speechless.

Jim dashed away to find a quiet corner, and was soon signalling frantically to the girls from an arbour in the front garden of a cottage.

Gail turned to Benney, as soon as he had gone. 'Benney! What does he mean? Why did he look like that?'

'He wants you. You're the one and only girl in the world. Didn't you know? Jim's been frightful since you disappeared; miserable, and restless, and not able to settle to anything. Gail Alwyn, if you *could* put up with him, it would be simply marvellous!'

Gail coloured. 'I hadn't the foggiest notion. I feel as if I'd been plunged into deep water! I'll need time to get used to the idea.'

'Oh, of course! But if you could be a little bit nice to Jim——! He's been so awfully unhappy.'

Gail's colour deepened. 'It seems so queer. I never thought of it. I shouldn't want—to do anything—for years and years, Benney.'

'Jim would wait, if he knew that you liked him,' Benney pleaded. 'He's found a place; let's go and tell him where you've been. He doesn't care twopence about the wedding!'

'I'd rather not go. I want to get used to this.'

Benedicta seized her arm. 'Oh, tosh! You can't be as brutal to poor Jim as all that! He's been pining to see you for nine months; it won't hurt you if he looks at you, and it will buck him up no end. Come and talk to him; pretend nothing has happened!'

'Something has happened! Something has happened to me!' Gail thought wildly. 'Something that I never thought would happen!—Oh, well, I'm not going to be frightened by Jimmy Bennett!'

She was very quiet, all the same, while Benney chattered about the wedding, and Rosemary, and the schoolgirls, and the twins, and told Jim

how thrilled she had been to meet the people from Wood End, where she was to go next term.

Jim hardly listened. He could not take his eyes off Gail, who kept hers fixed on her ice. She was older, he saw, than the schoolgirl he had known, who had rebelled so fiercely against the musical career planned for her. He wondered if she had had a difficult time, and longed to protect her. If he could have Gail to care for, how he would work!——he said to himself.

Benney started up. 'It's half-past four; perhaps Maidlin will ring up again!' and she fled to the Village Hall.

'Come back and tell us, Benney!' Gail called.

'Um!' Benedicta waved her hand. 'Not if I know it!' she said to herself. 'They can look after one another now! I'd only be in the way!'

It was Mary Devine who spoke this time, to give good news of Rosemary. 'Maid has gone to talk to Joan. She wants to see you in the Abbey presently, Benedicta.'

'I'll go back as soon as the Wood End girls have started,' Benney promised, and said nothing to Mary about Jim.

'All right, Abby Gail!' she called over the hedge. 'Rosemary's still asleep. I'm going to talk to Daffodil.'

'Benney, come here!' Gail cried.

But Benedicta had raced away to find the schoolgirls and ask more questions about Wood End school.

'Gail!' Jim spoke urgently. 'You won't disappear again? Give me a chance, and I'll make good, and then Quellyn won't have any right to send me away. If you don't turn me down, I don't care what he says.'

Gail gave him a brave, straight look, but her eyes were troubled. 'It's terribly nice of you! But I'd never thought—I didn't know; I must have time to think about it. And I wouldn't want to promise anything for years and years.'

'Oh, sure! I won't plague you,' Jim said eagerly. 'If you'll just say you don't loathe me utterly, and if you'll let me see you now and then, I can get busy and do things, while I'm waiting for you to think about it. I can come and see Ben at that school, and you'll be there, won't you?'

Gail gave a shaky laugh. 'I don't loathe you at all. You're terribly kind, and it's lovely to feel somebody cares about me. But—how old are you, Jim?'

'Twenty-one next Christmas.'

'This is March,' Gail laughed. 'I'm seventeen and a bit. It means waiting, for both of us. Perhaps you'll find somebody else.'

Jim grew scarlet. 'Look here! I'd like to start square. Ben might give me away. If we're going to be pals, we won't have secrets. I'll own up, shall I?'

Gail gave him a startled look. In a flash she knew that she cared about Jimmy. What was he going to say?

‘I *was* frightened!’ she said to Benney afterwards.

Jim plunged into his confession, awkward and shy, but determined to have nothing hidden between himself and Gail. ‘You know Miss Maidlin, Gail Ann?’

Gail stared at him. ‘Rather! I love her. Well?’

‘Well, for a day or two I thought I did. That’s all.’

‘You thought you—how do you mean?’

‘I was an ass,’ Jim said frankly. ‘I forgot she existed, when I saw you dancing with that red-haired infant. But when I saw her—we met her in France, two years ago, when I was only a kid, and those huge eyes of hers bowled me over altogether. We lost sight of her, and then when we came to see their Abbey, there she was; and though I’d met you and I knew you were the only girl in the world for me—well, I couldn’t find you, and I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again, and—and——’

‘And her eyes did the trick again,’ Gail helped him out. ‘I don’t wonder; I think she’s perfectly marvellous. But she’s too old for you; she’s twenty-four. She’ll feel you’re just a kid.’

‘Gosh! Is she as old as that?’ Jim said crestfallen. ‘She doesn’t look it.’

‘She’ll come of age when she’s twenty-five, and that’s next year. I suppose you know she’s to inherit heaps of money and a lot of property in Italy?’ Gail said ruthlessly.

Jim looked at her limply. ‘But that woman in the Abbey is her aunt; the caretaker person.’

Gail’s laugh rang out. ‘Didn’t you know? That’s the English side of Maid. What about the Ravarati bit? There’s more in that than big black eyes and a very large voice! Maid’s an heiress, Jimmy.’

‘I didn’t know,’ he admitted. ‘But it makes no difference. I forgot her the moment I saw you. D’you mind terribly much? I thought I’d better tell you.’

‘It was terribly nice of you to tell me,’ Gail said earnestly. ‘I don’t blame you one scrap. I can understand any man being swept off his feet by Maid. But she’d never marry you, you know.’

‘I don’t want her,’ he said doggedly. ‘I tell you, I forgot all about her. I want you.’

‘You couldn’t pay me a much bigger compliment, could you?’ Gail spoke lightly. Then she said more gravely, ‘I’m glad you felt you must tell me. I know what that means; I’m glad you wanted me to know. We’ll admire Maidlin together, won’t we?’

The hint that they might do anything together was enough for Jim. ‘Shake hands on it, Abigail Ann!’

‘Shake, James!’ and Gail gave him her hand.

‘And now tell me all about it!’ Jim pleaded. ‘Where have you been all these centuries? Where do you live? What do you do? Is Quellyn still bossing you? What about your music?’

‘I believe Sir Ivor has forgotten all about me,’ Gail said reflectively. ‘He’s wrapped up in Lady Joy and the children. I say, Jimmy! Music’s off; I hope you don’t mind? I can’t play in public; at least, not well enough to give recitals or play with the Quellyn orchestra, as Grandfather thought I’d do. Look, Jim!’ and she held out her left hand. ‘There’s not much to see; just a little scar. But that finger won’t come quite right. It will always be a little weak, and it might let me down in a concert. We’ve tried everything; I didn’t care, but Lady Joy was so upset about it. You saw the twin I was dancing with—Elizabeth Marchwood? Well, I couldn’t leave her to be burnt to a cinder in a blazing shed, could I?’

‘Rather not!’ Jim stared at her, fascinated. ‘Did you haul the kid out? I say, tell me the yarn! And—I *say*! They’ll let you do anything you want, even marry me, if you’ll just say you want it!’

Gail laughed. ‘But I don’t want it—yet. I’m going to give you three years to make me want it,’ she retorted.

CHAPTER XVIII

TROUBLE FOR JOY

‘Benney, did you know?’ Gail came running down the Abbey path, as the motor-coach full of girls was about to start for Wood End School. She paused before taking her place to put the breathless question to Benedicta.

‘Rather! No one could live with Jimmy for the last nine months and not know there was something terribly wrong,’ Benney responded. ‘Did you take him to the Abbey?’

‘Hurry up, Gail Alwyn! We waited for you,’ cried Tamzine.

‘He took me,’ Gail grinned at Benney. ‘We wandered hand in hand among the ruins—but it wasn’t actually hand in hand. That may come some day!’ She sprang into the coach and waved her hat gaily.

‘I shall adore having Gail for a sister!’ Benney raced up the lane, hoping to find the car still at the Abbey gate.

But Jim had gone, not at all anxious to face Benedicta’s mocking eyes, with the memory of his own rapt gaze at Maidlin vividly before him.

‘He won’t come to see me quite so often now!’ Benney said to herself, as she changed into her everyday frock. ‘But I seem to think Jimmy will be very fond of me again when I go to Wood End next term! The next thing—oh, there’s Maid! The next thing happens *now!*’

She flung on her coat, for she had long since learnt that the Abbey, with its open arches and passages, was draughty, and ran out to join Maidlin on the garth.

‘How marvellous of you to come so soon! Aren’t you dead tired with it all? I’ll bring cushions; now, sit down here and rest. Hasn’t it been an odd day? Splendid—and dreadful—and thrilling, all mixed up!’

‘That’s just how I feel about to-day, Benedicta.’ Maidlin sat down thankfully to rest, leaning back against the cloister wall. ‘Joy has gone to lie down, but I couldn’t be still, so I came to talk to you. I’m all worked up and too tired to rest.’

‘I know,’ Benney agreed. ‘Rosamund’s part of the day was all lovely. But the Rosemary bit has been awful; how is she now?’

‘The doctors say she’s doing well. Jen is sleeping, and she needs it. Joan has been a wonderful help to her, but she’s tired out. Apart from Rosemary, have you had a jolly day, Benedicta?’

‘Oh, *yes!*’ Benney’s eyes sparkled. ‘Perfectly amazing, Maid! Those girls, Tamzine and Daffodil and Sonny and the rest, in the jolly smocks—

I'm going to their school next term, and I didn't know. Isn't it glorious?'

'To Wood End?' Maidlin asked, startled. 'But when was it arranged?'

'Oh, months ago! I knew I was going to Wood End in Sussex, but I didn't know that Wood End was Rosamund's school, any more than I knew that Gail lived there to keep the tuck-shop. Nobody mentioned Gail and nobody said the name of the school. As soon as I saw the smocks I guessed; I've seen pictures of the Wood End uniform, but I haven't got my things yet. I'm thrilled to the bones! I'm going to learn all about country stunts and especially about animals; I'd love to be a vet, or a half-vet! I'm afraid I couldn't pass the exams, to be a proper one. You see, Maid, Daddy has a place in Devonshire as well as the London house, and Mother has always promised that I should learn gardening and be able to take care of it for them. I'm dying to start!'

'Your future seems arranged,' Maidlin said, laughing. 'How jolly for you to have met the girls!'

'Daffodil says she and Rosalie Kane will look after me while I'm new. It's marvellous to have friends there before I go!'

'Daffodil Trenow and Rosalie Kane are the pickles of the school. You'd better be careful, Benedicta.'

Benney's eyes danced. 'I'll be a mother to Rosalie and Daffodil!—Oh, Maid! You haven't heard yet about Gail and Jimmy!'

Maidlin stared at her. 'What about them? You promised not to say anything.'

'Yes, but we didn't expect Jim to turn up on the village green and find Gail dancing with Elizabeth-Twin, next to Jansy Raymond and me.'

'*Did* he?' Maidlin sat up and clasped her knees, in intense interest. 'Benney, what happened?'

'I tucked them into a garden together, with lemonade and ices, and then I remembered I must go, in case you rang up. So I vanished tactfully and left them to get on with it. I'm quite sure Gail won't marry Jimmy yet, but I'm nearly sure she'll do it some day.'

'Poor Abby Gail! She must have been taken by surprise. I meant to prepare her,' Maidlin exclaimed. 'Did she have a dreadful shock, Benney?'

'I think she did. She looked a bit frightened; Jimmy stared at her as if he'd like to eat her, and she couldn't help knowing what he meant. But she was jolly enough when she went off with the rest, Maid. She said she'd been wandering hand in hand with him through the Abbey. She didn't mean it, you know.'

'No, I don't suppose she did. Oh well, that knocks my plan all to pieces! I came to tell you about it, but it isn't needed now. Still, it might be jolly.'

‘What is your plan? Gail said you were going to tell her, when she comes.’

‘Rosemary’s illness has upset everything,’ Maidlin explained. ‘Joy and Ivor are going off on Sunday night to Holland for three days; he has a big concert in Amsterdam on Tuesday evening. The children and I were going to the Manor, and Mary-Dorothy was to be left in peace to finish her book. Now we can’t go to the Manor; it’s out of the question. We shall stay at home, and I was going to suggest that you and Gail should come and keep me company. The twinnies are just a little too young; and Mary must stick to her work. I thought we’d have Gail here and I’d talk to her, and then if she agreed we’d ask your brother to tea and they could renew their friendship. But they seem to have gone far beyond that.’

‘They’ve renewed it all right! But I’m sure Jimmy would adore coming to tea with Gail. Oh, Maid, would you really like to have us? It would be marvellous to stay with you for a few days!’

‘Your mother isn’t ready for you to go home yet, so you may as well stay where you are. Could you bear to leave the Abbey and live in a house again?’

‘I don’t want ever to leave the Abbey, but I know I shall have to do it. I’d love to go home with you! Maid, Sir Ivor Quellyn will let Gail be engaged to Jim, won’t he? Will he mind now?’

‘Not so much as he would have done. He was thinking of her music and her public career. But he’ll want them to wait; anybody would say that, Benney. They’re too young; Jim must show he’s in earnest, and that he’s able to take care of Gail.’

‘He’ll go into Daddy’s business,’ Benedicta said wisely. ‘Dad wants him, but Jim kept playing about, trying to write music. He’ll want to do something definite now.’

‘Music can wait. Joy started writing songs when she was at school; then things began to happen to her, when she met Andrew Marchwood, and her music went into the background. Now she’s writing really good songs. Jim should go into business and work, and make a home for Gail; and the music will come later on.’

‘That sounds awfully sensible; I shall tell Jimmy.—Oh, Maid! Here’s Sir Ivor. Couldn’t we ask him about Gail now?’

Maidlin rose in startled surprise, as Sir Ivor came to her across the garth. ‘We don’t often see you in the Abbey. Is anything the matter?’

‘Yes, badly,’ he pushed back his dark hair and gazed down at her with a worried look. ‘I want your help, Madalena.’

‘Mine? Where is Joy?’ Maidlin cried.

‘Resting. She may come along presently; I left a note to say I’d gone to look for you in the Abbey. I have to decide a big question quickly, Maid.’

Maidlin stared up at him. ‘Well, Ivor? Isn’t Joy the one to help you?’

‘Not this time. The question is, whether to tell her anything about it.’

Maidlin frowned. ‘Then there’s something wrong. Why shouldn’t you tell Joy? How can you help telling her?’

Ivor Quellyn ruffled his hair again with a restless hand. ‘Because I love Joy, and it may break her heart. I could turn down the offer and say nothing about it. But it’s the chance of a lifetime, Maid; I’ve always longed for it. I’m—afraid—of what Joy will say.’

Maidlin gazed at him, her small hands clenched. ‘Ivor! What is it? What does somebody want you to do?’

‘To go to New York for three years, to reorganise the David Orchestra. You heard of old David Davidson’s death? They’ve offered the post to me.’

Maidlin stepped back, still staring at him incredulously. Benedicta, frightened by her white face, slipped an arm round her. ‘Sit down, Maid, do!’

‘New York?’ Maidlin said, as if she could not understand. ‘Three years? To live there?’

‘It’s one of the biggest orchestras in America,’ he urged. ‘I’ve always hoped for the chance of handling it. But this means re-making, re-shaping; they’re out-of-date and they know it. Davidson was old, and they followed him like sheep. Now that his grip on them is gone, they want to go ahead. There’s good stuff in them.’

‘Oh, I see it’s a wonderful chance.’ Maidlin still looked dazed. ‘But—wouldn’t it mean living in America?’

‘That’s the point,’ he eyed her anxiously. ‘How will Joy take the idea? I know she’s bound up in this place and in her friends.’

‘I think she’d die, if she had to live in America,’ Maidlin cried desperately, her first thought for Joy’s distress. ‘Couldn’t you turn it down? Ivor, you couldn’t go to America!’

‘I could refuse, of course.’ His face grew hard and set. ‘Is it what Joy would wish, do you think?’

Maidlin dropped her head into her hands, and Benney pulled her down on her cushions. ‘Maid, dear, don’t faint!’

Maidlin, very white, looked up at Ivor Quellyn. ‘I don’t see why you should ask me such a question! Why don’t you decide for yourself?’

‘It isn’t fair!’ Benney said indignantly.

Ivor looked uncomfortable. ‘Perhaps that’s true, Maid. But you know her so well. I want to do the best for her. I could refuse the offer and say nothing about it. But—*is* it what Joy would wish? After all, she has married me!’

‘But she never thought——! Oh, let me think!’ and Maidlin knit her fingers in distress as she stared across the garth. ‘What would Joy want? It’s up to me to say.’

There was silence in the cloisters. Benedicta felt and looked indignant at this ruthless breaking of the restful evening, and at the weight of the burden thrust suddenly on Maidlin; but she knew she could not help.

‘I couldn’t ask the Marchwoods to-day,’ Ivor urged at last. ‘And I have to go off for the B.B.C. concert presently. The news of this offer may have leaked out, and if I’m definitely turning it down I had better say so at once.’

Maidlin looked up, her face a shade whiter still. ‘That settles it; you needn’t have asked me. If there’s the slightest chance of its leaking out, Joy will have to know. And she must hear it from you, not from the papers or any of your friends. She’d never forgive you if she heard about it afterwards.’

‘Oh, Maid!’ cried Benney. ‘She’d know he had given it up for her sake!’

‘Ivor can tell her he’s willing to do it. She’d feel terrible if she knew he had kept it from her, even for her own sake.’

‘Then you think I dare tell her?’ Ivor was obviously afraid of distressing Joy.

‘You can’t help it. And’—Maidlin drew a long breath—‘Joy has the right to know. She has married you; it’s just possible she may care more about your career and your happiness than about her own feelings.’

‘When she married me, we never thought of this,’ Ivor began.

‘But she married you for whatever might come. I don’t know much about marriage,’ Maidlin said, ‘but it seems to me this is a very big thing for both of you, and you ought to see it through together—like Jen and Kenneth, over Rosemary’s illness; they helped one another. Joy will need help; it will be a great trouble to her; and she may help you, for I think you need help too. Why did you come to me? You *must* tell her; and you must help her to bear it.’

‘I feel it will upset her so much,’ he said doubtfully.

‘Of course it will upset her! Wouldn’t it upset you, if she asked you to leave London for her sake, and live in the depths of the country and never go to another concert in town? That’s what it will seem like to Joy—exile.’

‘Well, can I ask her to do that for me?’

‘I don’t know that she will do it,’ Maidlin retorted, tired and overstrung. ‘She may say you must go alone and do your job, and come back to her when you can spare a week or two; it doesn’t take long to go to America now. I don’t say she’ll go to New York with you. She may decide that she won’t have the twins brought up in that sort of life. When she married you and we knew she could go on living at home, we said no man would ever

induce her to bring up the children anywhere but at the Abbey. It means an enormous lot to her that this should be the only home they have ever known; and she lived only for them for seven years. She'll have to think about them as well as you. But I don't believe she'd like you to turn down this offer; she'll know what it means to you. She'll say you must go to New York. The question will be whether she'll go with you or not.'

'I wouldn't go without her,' Ivor exclaimed.

'Then you'd be turning it down for your own sake, not for hers. You must consult her, anyway. I don't know how you could dream of deciding without asking her. And I don't know how you could come to me first! Give Joy a chance. What do you think she married you for? You don't understand people very well, you know.'

'I was trying to do what would be best for Joy,' he defended himself strenuously.

'You should trust her more,' Maidlin said. 'You mustn't treat her as if she were a baby.'

Ivor looked at her, dumb with dismay. He understood and could handle orchestras, which, in their devotion and loyalty, never questioned his decrees; but without suspecting it he had become an autocrat. In this new home life which was such a joy to him, he was constantly coming up against the fact that people were individuals and no two were alike; he never knew how Joy or Maidlin or Jen would take things. It was not the first time he had been told he did not understand; even Gail had said he was an idiot.

Benedicta looked as if she would like to do the same. Maidlin, staring limply at the grass, was so evidently worn out after the exhausting day. But Sir Ivor was absorbed in his trouble and did not see, and Benney dared not do more than glower at him.

Maidlin looked up. 'You'd better tell Joy before you go to town. If you don't, she'll get it out of me; I can't keep anything from her, and she'll see I'm worried. I don't want her to hear from anybody but you; and I don't want to have to tell her.'

'Oh, he mustn't shove that on to you too!' Benney cried. 'Can't he do some of his own jobs? Do all men need to be looked after?'

Sir Ivor looked at her—'As if I'd been an ant or a blackbeetle,' she said afterwards. Then he strode away across the garth.

CHAPTER XIX

JOY FACES HER PROBLEM

With a tired little cry, Maidlin dropped her head on her knees and put up her arms to hide her face. 'One thing after another! Rosamund has gone. Now Joy will go. Why?'

Benney crouched beside her and flung an arm round her. 'Maid! Oh, Maid, I never thought what this would mean to you! And he never did; he can only think about himself!'

'Joy,' Maidlin said brokenly. 'He thought about her first.'

'Wouldn't you go with them, Maidlin? You couldn't stay behind!'

'I don't know.' Maidlin's tone was hopeless and helpless. 'I can't see what's going to happen. I'm not sure that Joy will go. It would break her heart to leave the children; but she'll hate the thought of taking them to America. I don't know what she'll do.'

'Maid!' Benney gave a gasp of dismay. 'Here she is! Lady Joy—coming out of the chapter-house! How did she get there?'

'She hasn't seen him; she's come by the passage from the house,' Maidlin sprang to her feet. 'Benney, go after him! Fetch him back! Be as quick as you can. Oh, Benney, be quick! Joy will ask me what's the matter!'

There was terror in her voice. Benedicta gave one look at her and one at Joy, coming unconsciously across the garth. Then she fled, and passing Joy, shot down the tresaunt passage to the garden gate.

'What's the matter with Benedicta, Maid?—Maidlin, what has happened?' Joy cried, the fear in Maidlin's face seizing her. 'Where is Ivor? Hasn't he been here?'

Maidlin knew of old the impossibility of concealment between them. 'Joy, Ivor's in trouble. He was here a moment ago; he's gone to find you. Benney will bring him back.'

'What is it?' Joy asked sharply. 'I guessed there was something wrong, when he left that note saying he'd gone to the Abbey. Why didn't he come to me?'

'You were resting. He didn't want to wake you—Joy!' Maidlin cried. 'Don't be upset because he told me first! There's too big a trouble coming; don't let a little thing worry you! Poor Ivor! He is so silly—he was afraid to tell you—he wanted to know what to do. I think he wanted a little bit of encouragement. He really meant to give it all up for your sake, and it's the chance of a lifetime—the thing he has wanted more than anything else. He

was willing to give it up and say nothing to you, if I said you couldn't bear it. That's why he asked me first; because he wanted to do the best for you. I told him he ought to have gone straight to you.'

'I should have thought so.' Joy knit her brows. 'Maid, what is the trouble?'

'I can't tell you. It's his business. Go and meet him, Joy.'

Joy looked at her. Then she turned and ran after Benedicta down the dark passage.

Maidlin sank on her cushion again. 'Oh, I wish people wouldn't do it! All this marrying—breaking up our home! What will Joy do? What shall I do? What will happen to all of us?'

She felt Benney's arms round her, and looked up quickly. 'Did you find him? Has Joy found him?'

'In the Abbot's garden,' Benedicta explained. 'He came rushing back, and she came rushing out. She ran at him and cried: "What is it, Ivor? What is it? Why did you tell Maid first?" He put his arm round her, to hold her up, and said: "The David Orchestra; they want me. Will you come to the States with me, for three years, Joy?" She went as white as a ghost and said: "To live? Three years? Go to America for *three years*?" And he said: "That's why I told Maid first. I'll give it up, if you say the word. But Maid said you'd have to know." Then Lady Joy sort of clung to him, and she was crying, and I came away, Maid.'

'We can't help her just now. When he goes to town she'll want us,' Maidlin said wearily. 'Don't ask me what she'll do, or what I'll do, Benney. I simply don't know. It's the sort of thing I'd never dreamed of.'

'But you'll go with them, if they go, won't you, Maid?'

'I don't see how I can,' Maidlin said unhappily. 'I must go to Italy presently; for my birthday, you know. I'd like to give up the money and be done with it; I've said so for years. But no one will agree. If it means my being left behind when Joy goes to New York, I shall hate the money! But she may not go. I can't tell what she'll do.'

She lapsed into unhappy silence, and Benney sat close to her, but knew that no words could comfort her. Whatever was decided, a break in the family circle seemed inevitable.

Maidlin roused herself at last. 'I'd better go back to the house. Someone may be needed, and Joy won't want to be disturbed. I might be able to save her answering the 'phone, if Joan rings up. Come with me, Benney, and I'll lend you that other book of Mary's. We'll go by the way Joy came; then if she's still in the garden with Ivor we shan't interrupt them.'

Benney had seen the underground passage already, with its hidden entrance behind the chapter-house and its exit in the big hall of Joy's house.

She picked up the torch Joy had dropped, and followed Maidlin across the garth and down the stone stair into the depths.

A maid met them as they came through the door. 'Miss Rosamund—I mean, the Countess of Kentisbury—on the 'phone, Miss Maidlin.'

Maidlin ran to the telephone. 'Ros! Is it you? Are you in London?'

'Hotel, Maid. I hope you're not all tired out. How is Rosemary?'

'Going on quite well. Jen's having a sleep. Are you all right, Ros-Countess?'

'Yes, Maid dear, but you're not,' Rosamund said, sharply. 'There's something wrong, by your voice. Is it just exhaustion, with Rosemary and me? Or is anything the matter? Don't say Margaret has fallen down the well again!'

Maidlin caught her breath. 'I didn't mean to tell you, but you may see it in the papers. Ivor has been offered the David Orchestra, in New York, for three years. And he wants to go.'

'Maid!' Rosamund's voice was startled. 'What does Joy say? It's a fine chance for him, but what about Joy? And you, Maid?'

'I don't know anything yet. He's only just told her. They're talking it over, in the Abbey.'

'Will she go with him?'

'I don't know, Ros.'

'Well, my time's up.' Rosamund spoke with energy. 'I shall ring you again at ten o'clock, for news of Rosemary. Tell me then what is decided. And—Maid! If Joy goes to New York and says you'd better not go with her, remember that I've a house now and that it's yours, if you'll come. There will always be a place for you at Kentisbury, and, goodness knows! there's room enough! So come to us, if you don't go with Joy, Maid. Count on me as your second home, Primrose.'

'Oh—Ros! It's lovely of you to think of me at once!' There was a break in Maidlin's voice.

'I bet neither Joy nor Ivor has thought about Maid yet!' Rosamund said, as she turned from the 'phone, to tell Geoffrey of this new happening.

Maidlin called to Benedicta to come and fetch her book. But as they went up the staircase Benney gave a shout and pointed through the window. 'Lady Joy! In a great hurry! Never mind me, Maid; I expect she wants you.'

Maidlin's quick look showed her Joy, racing across the lawn from the Abbey gate in the twilight, with Ivor hurrying after her.

'Have they quarrelled? Joy's fearful temper! Is she running away from him?' The thoughts rushed through Maidlin's mind, as she ran down to the hall. 'Joy! Oh, Joy, what can I do?'

‘I’m going with him. Help me to dress, Maid! He has to change, or I’d go as I am, but he’s very quick. I’ve only ten minutes. I must go with him!’

‘To America?’ Maidlin had lost her head completely.

Joy’s laugh was more than half a sob. ‘Not to-night, Maid! To the concert. I couldn’t sit at home and think.’ She was halfway up the stair. ‘We’ll be very late home. Keep Benedicta here for company. Stay with her, Benney!’

‘Oh, I’ll love to stay!’ Benney cried.

‘Oh—Joy! After the wedding—you’ll be dead!’ Maidlin woke up and remonstrated with energy.

‘I’ll sleep all to-morrow. And I had an hour after tea. If Ros or Jen rings up, tell them why I’ve gone. They’ll know I couldn’t stay, with this hanging over us. We must talk it out together.’

‘But you’ll starve! You’ll miss your dinner!’

‘We’ve been eating all day,’ said Joy. ‘Find my black frock, Maid; it will do.’

‘You didn’t eat much! Joy, you’ll kill yourself!’

‘Ask Cook to pack some sandwiches and we’ll have them in the car; the house is full of food. Ivor never wants a meal before a show, and I couldn’t eat much to-night. Thanks be, my hair doesn’t take long now!’ Joy was changing at express speed.

Maidlin yielded to necessity, and gave what help she could. ‘Ros rang up from the hotel, Joy, and she’ll ring again at ten. Rosemary’s going on well.’

‘Give the Countess my love, and tell her what has happened. Tell Joan that I shall come to the Manor to-morrow, unless Jen comes here. I must see her as soon as she can stand it. Don’t ask me questions to-night, Maid. I simply don’t know what to say.’

She gave a despairing look round. ‘I can’t! Oh, I can’t! But how could I let him go? And yet I can’t let him give it up; not the David! Oh, Maid—I don’t know! But people matter more than things or places, don’t they?’

Her lips were quivering; she kissed Maidlin hurriedly and caught up her big coat and gloves. ‘There’s the car. I haven’t kept him waiting.’

Then she was gone, and Maidlin and Benney, on the terrace in the half-dark, watched the lights of the car as they vanished down the beech avenue.

‘Come and tell Mary-Dorothy!’ Maidlin said unsteadily. ‘You’ll stay with us, Benedicta? You can have Rosamund’s room; it’s next to mine.’

‘I want to stay! I wish I could help. When will they be back, Maid?’

‘About half-past twelve or one. Joy was silly to go, after the day she’s had, but it was just like her; no one could have stopped her. But she won’t enjoy the concert. The symphony’s “Eroica”; perhaps it will express her

feelings! I hope they don't have to carry her out,' Maidlin said gloomily. 'Come and wait for Mary; she's gone to the Manor, for a word with Joan.'

They met Mary as she entered the big hall. Maidlin dropped limply into a chair. 'Well, Mary-Dorothy! You're a back number; quite off the map. Joy has gone to the concert with Ivor, half dressed and without any dinner. And I think she's going to America with him. "People matter more than things or places"; she said it. I don't know yet whether you and I and the children are going, or whether we're all to be left at home.'

Mary Devine stood staring down at her. 'Maid! You're not——'

'I'm not off my head, and I couldn't make up anything half so wild and dreadful,' Maidlin wailed, and putting her face down on the arm of the chair she began to cry, and sobbed as if she would never stop.

Mary took her in her arms. 'Maid! Maid dearest! What has happened? I've only been out for an hour!'

'Everything!' Maidlin gasped and clung to her. 'Oh, Mary—everything's gone—broken! Joy's going away! It's the end of everything!'

'New York—for three years,' Benedicta explained, for Mary was bewildered. 'An orchestra's asked him, and he's dying to go. It's a job he's always wanted. And Lady Joy won't let him give it up for her sake. He said he would, but she won't have it. She has to think about his career.'

'Oh, good for Joy!' Mary cried. 'Maid dear, whatever it means to us, be glad Joy has taken it that way! Think if she'd refused and kept him here! Oh, Maid, let's be glad she can put him first!'

Maidlin lay in her arms, growing gradually quieter. At last she said unsteadily, 'I'm sorry I'm such a baby. I see what you mean, Mary-Dorothy. It's better for Joy to go and for her and Ivor to be happy. If she kept him here he'd be disappointed, even if it was for her sake. And she'd feel unhappy too.'

'She'd feel she had held him back, and that in marrying her he had lost this big chance. It would always lie between them, Maid. You don't want their new happiness ruined?'

'No.' Maidlin quivered again, but there was new energy in her voice. 'No, Mary, that would be dreadful. The David's a very big thing; he mustn't miss the chance. Since this has happened there's only the one way out. I see it now. You are a comfort, Mary-Dorothy!'

'I'm as much frightened of the coming changes as you are, Maidie,' Mary said soberly. 'But I am more than thankful Joy has put him first and her own wishes last. That's the biggest thing. If she had failed him they'd never have been quite happy again.'

'That would have been worst of all,' Maidlin admitted. 'You're right, Mary-Dorothy dear. But I wish I could see what's going to happen to us all!'

CHAPTER XX

JOY DECIDES

‘Worry doesn’t seem to affect Ivor,’ Maidlin said wearily, as she switched off the wireless. ‘I wonder if Joy has enjoyed it?’

‘I suppose it was marvellous,’ Benney ventured. ‘I can’t say I liked it terribly much.’

Mary Devine smiled at her. ‘Perhaps you’ll discover “Eroica” later on, *Benedicta*. It’s hardly your standard at present.’

‘It was wonderful,’ Maidlin said. ‘But for once I found it hard to listen. Ivor didn’t find any difficulty in concentrating, that’s evident; he’d forget all about the trouble till the music was over. Go to bed, Benney; I shall come almost at once. It’s nearly eleven o’clock; we ought not to have let you sit up for the concert.’

‘But we haven’t been to the Abbey to fetch my tooth-brush! Dinner was ready, so you said we’d go afterwards. And then there was the concert. If you’ll lend me a torch, I’ll go and fetch my things.’

‘Oh, no, you won’t! Not alone.’ Mary and Maidlin spoke together.

‘We’ll all go,’ Mary said. ‘Fetch your coats. A walk won’t hurt any of us.’

‘We’ll go by underground,’ Maidlin added. ‘It’s dark there in any case, so it doesn’t matter going at night.’

‘I saw Rosamund last night,’ Benney whispered, as they came up from the tunnel into the chapter-house. ‘I didn’t watch her, because of what you said; but I saw her appear, like the ghost of Lady Jehane.’

‘We knew she’d gone, but she didn’t want any of us,’ Maidlin agreed. ‘She laughed when she heard Joy had gone to town, when she rang up just now; but she was rather horrified. “Just like Joy. She’ll go to New York,” Ros said. Joy has always been keen on travelling; Joan reminded me of that. I didn’t know her as a little girl, but Joan says she used to wander about the country and come home all over mud; that was when they lived in the Abbey, and this little room was Joy’s bedroom.’

‘Is that why they call her “Traveller’s Joy”?’

‘Cicely Everett called her that, when she met her first; Joy and Joan were fifteen, and the Hall and the Abbey didn’t belong to them then. Is that all you want for the night?’ and Maidlin turned homewards.

Benney, in Rosamund’s lavender room, heard nothing till the early morning; she did not know that Maidlin, lying listening, slipped out of bed

and closed the door between the two rooms, just before one o'clock. Then Maidlin crept out, in her rose-pink dressing-gown and with heavy black braids of hair hanging down, to meet Joy in the hall.

Joy was very quiet now, in the reaction after the excitement. 'Oh—Maidie!' she said wearily. 'You ought to be in bed, dear.'

'I've had two hours in bed. But one ear was listening for the car all the time. Tea—coffee—milk—or cocoa, Joy? Here are sandwiches; would you like anything more? Ivor, your supper's ready,' and she lifted covers off the dishes. 'Joy, there's a hot bottle in your bed. Are you frozen and starved?'

'No, only very tired.' Joy sank into her chair. 'It is so good of you, Maid. You are a comfort to me, dear.'

'I said that to Mary-Dorothy this evening.' Maidlin reddened. 'I had to cry a little, and she was nice about it. Did you enjoy "Eroica"? It was marvellously done, Ivor.'

Joy looked at her husband and then at Maidlin, with apologetic eyes. 'Maid——!'

'She says she didn't hear a note of it,' said Ivor.

'I really didn't, Maid. He might have been giving "The New World" or "The Clock", for all I heard.'

'Oh, Joy!—Then you care more for him than for music!'

'It's the first time I sat through a concert and didn't hear it,' Joy owned. 'But I was thinking as much of all the rest of you as of Ivor. His part of it was decided almost at once. Maid dear, come here! I hadn't a minute to spare before.'

'Better not start on it now,' said her husband. 'You won't get to bed to-night, Joy.'

Joy looked at Maidlin, who came to her quickly and dropped on her knees at her side. 'Maid, you know I must go, don't you?' Joy asked unsteadily. 'You aren't thinking it's a mistake?'

'Oh, Joy, no! He must go, and you must go with him. Anything else would be impossible. Mary-Dorothy showed me that.'

'My blessings on Mary,' said Ivor fervently.

'I'm glad,' Joy whispered. 'I hoped you'd have talked it over. What do the others say?'

'Joan says, of course you must go. Ros says she knows you'll go.'

'I don't know yet how I'll bear it. But I'm glad you all agree. I'd have felt worse if you'd thought it was dreadful of me. Maid, I won't leave you behind, if you want to come. We'll talk it over; I can't see yet what is best to do.'

'How could you? You've only known for a few hours. There's time enough to think about us. The great thing is that Ivor's going to have the

David and you're going to help him, Joy. You'll be an enormous help to him in New York, of course. Now we have to be brave and find the best way for all of us. Ros says'—and Maidlin laughed shakily—'that if you won't have me with you, she wants me, and I'm to go and live at Kentisbury Castle.'

'Oh, Maid! That would be rather nice!' Joy exclaimed. 'It would be fun to watch our Ros turning into a peeress!'

'Yes, but it means changes, and I'm afraid of changes.' Maidlin caught her breath.

'Poor Maidie! I feel just the same to-night. But sometimes the changes turn out for the best, in the end, Maid. What a day it has been! Rosamund married—Rosemary's life just saved—Ivor and I uprooted!'

'Two of those things are the best that could possibly have happened,' Maidlin said, with a flash of inspiration. 'Perhaps the third will turn out well too, Joy.'

Joy put her arms round her. 'Maid, that's lovely of you. We'll hope so, whatever it means in the present.'

'There are Gail and Jimmy Bennett too,' Maidlin added. 'That happened to-day; or rather yesterday. That's another marvellous thing.'

'What's that?' Ivor looked up from his meal.

'Oh, bother! I forgot you,' Maidlin sighed. 'And it's one o'clock in the morning!' She sat back on her heels and gazed at him defiantly, pushing away the loosened plaits from her face. 'It's no use saying anything, Ivor. You'll be in America; you can't expect to manage Gail when you're so far away. I should think you'd be glad to know things are fixed up for her.'

'First I've heard of it,' he growled. 'I'm her guardian. What's all this about?'

'Jim came to see the wedding, or rather, the dancing on the green. He ran across Gail, and Benedicta seems to think it's only a question of time till they'll be engaged. You won't really object, will you, Ivor? Gail's quite determined not to play in public, so her career needn't worry you. Why shouldn't she settle down and be happy with Jim?'

'But she's only a child, Maid! It seems very sudden,' Joy remonstrated.

'My objection to young Bennett is that he can't stick at anything and thinks he can write music,—at twenty!'

'They won't do anything until Gail is twenty,' Maidlin said soothingly. 'If by that time Jim has made good in his father's business, you wouldn't mind then, would you, Ivor? And anyway, you'll be in New York,' she added.

Joy gave a tired laugh. 'You can't have it both ways, Ivor. If we go to the States we won't be able to boss these young people, and they'll go their own way.'

‘It’s absurd,’ Ivor said wrathfully. ‘The child’s only seventeen. She can’t know her own mind.’

‘There’s time for her to change it, before she’s twenty,’ Joy pointed out.

‘Joy, will you take the twinnies to New York?’ Maidlin asked anxiously.

Joy’s face quivered in sudden pain. ‘Maid, that’s where I’m on the rocks! I don’t know. What will be best for them, Maid? All the rest is clear enough, though it tears me in two. Ivor mustn’t lose this chance, for the David is a big thing. I can’t be parted from him for months at a time. I can’t bear to say good-bye to everybody and everything here, but I shall have to do it, for I must go with him; so I must bear it somehow. But when it comes to the children, the trouble is to know what’s best for them. All the travelling and fuss and excitement—and living in a city, even if Ivor finds us a house; I simply will not live in a flat, twenty storeys up!’

‘Not with Elizabeth and Margaret,’ Maidlin agreed. ‘Oh, no, Joy! You must have a house. There must be houses in New York, or just outside. A flat would never do, however full of luxuries it was! Not with our twins!’

‘No, we feel that. But wouldn’t they be better quietly at home in the country?’

‘You haven’t got to decide to-night,’ Ivor rose. ‘When you can think more clearly you’ll know what will be best for the children. I want them with us, of course. I don’t want to part you from them, and I don’t want to lose them for months at a time.’

‘No, you’re terribly fond of them.’ Maidlin looked up. ‘But why “months,” Ivor? I thought it was a three-years’ appointment?’

He gave an impatient exclamation. ‘My dear Maid, we shouldn’t be there all the time! It only takes four days! I have engagements I can’t give up at a moment’s notice. For the first year, at least, there are dates I should have to keep, on this side; they’ll understand that. There’s the Concertgebouw again in November; and in January a Hallé concert; and the Pasedelou; and Basle. I couldn’t let all those down.’

‘Oh!’ Maidlin’s face cleared. ‘Of course not, Ivor. A man like you, booked up months ahead, can’t throw over everything in a moment. You’ll come back for the biggest shows, and you’ll bring Joy with you, for a few days at home with us?’

‘I’m not going to have the Atlantic between us!’ Joy exclaimed. ‘For the first year, while Ivor has to keep his engagements here and on the Continent, we shall be very unsettled, Maid, and it may be better for you and the children to stay here.’

‘To receive you when you come home,’ Maidlin agreed. ‘I’m beginning to understand. It was silly of us not to think it out carefully. Of course, Ivor can’t vanish to the States at a moment’s notice!’

‘They want me to go and take charge as soon as possible,’ Ivor said. ‘There are autumn plans and programmes, and things ought to be in train. Their dates will have to fit in with mine for the first winter; after that, of course, I shall take no more engagements on this side without consulting them.’

‘It’s all very complicated,’ Maidlin sighed. ‘I wish it hadn’t happened! We were so peaceful and settled down! I feel as if somebody had stirred us up with a big spoon! But at least you aren’t going to vanish to the States for three years without seeing us all that time, Joy! It isn’t quite so bad as it seemed at first.’

‘That’s a good thought to take up to bed,’ and Joy rose wearily. ‘It was sweet of you to come down to look after us, Maid. Go back to bed, dear, and forget it all till the morning.’

‘I’ll try to banish it by thinking of the good things; Rosamund and Geoffrey—Jen and Rosemary—Gail and Jimmy,’ said Maidlin.

‘I’ll just look at the children before I go to bed.’ And Joy turned into the nursery and switched on one shaded light, far away from the two little beds.

Then her wild scream brought Maidlin and Ivor rushing to her side. ‘They’re gone! They’re not here!’

And Joy fell half-fainting upon the nearest empty bed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TWINS ARE MISSING

Nelly, with a terrified face, ran from her little room next door, still dazed with sleep.

‘Where are the children?’ Ivor shouted at her.

‘I can’t think, sir! I never heard a sound.’

‘Help me with Joy, Ivor,’ Maidlin panted. ‘They can’t be far away. Joy’s had too much to bear to-day.’

Joy struggled up, her eyes wild. ‘Where are they? Ivor—Maid—find them!’

‘We’ll find them, Joy. They must be somewhere close at hand.’ Ivor was making a hasty, futile search in the corners of the room and under the beds. ‘They’ve slipped away and hidden, to tease us. They couldn’t disappear!’

‘One hears of such dreadful things!’ Joy sobbed, quite unstrung with the shock.

‘Oh, we don’t have kidnappers here! If it was America——’ Then Ivor stopped, and a startled look shot from him to Maidlin.

‘They must be somewhere in the house, Joy. We’ll have to talk to them in earnest; we can’t have them playing tricks like this!’ Maidlin exclaimed. ‘We’ll find them, if you’ll be quiet and rest. Oh—Mary!’ as Mary, only half awake, appeared at the door. ‘Fetch the maids and look everywhere for the children. They’re hiding somewhere. Nelly never heard them get up.’

‘You go too, Maid,’ Joy whispered. ‘And Ivor! Don’t waste time with me; I’m all right.’

‘Sure, Joy? It’s terribly naughty of them.’ Maidlin kissed Joy and ran off to help.

‘Little wretches! To-night, of all nights! Poor old Joy! It’s enough to make her really ill. Where can the silly babies have gone?’

‘Is it a fire?’ Benney peered out of her door, looking frightened.

‘No, it’s all right. Go back to bed and don’t worry,’ and Maidlin ran into her room to fetch her torch for dark corners, though the lights had sprung up all over the house. All the time she was listening for the shout which would tell that the truants had been found.

‘What is it, Maid?’ Benney persisted. ‘Something’s happened. I could help.’

‘Put on some clothes and your slippers, then. The twins have hidden somewhere, and we can’t find them. Joy found their beds empty.’

‘Oh—Maid! Oh, the little brutes!’ Benney began to dress in feverish haste.

Maidlin had gone, racing down the corridor and up the stairs to the attics, where the twins had a play-room which they loved. But Nelly had been there before her, and met her at the door with terror in her face.

‘They’re not here, Miss Maid. You don’t think anyone could have come and taken them away? The windows were open. But I’d have heard something; the door was open between the rooms. I never heard a sound.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Maidlin said sharply. ‘The window looks to the front of the house and it’s not sheltered by trees or anything. How could anybody put up a ladder on the terrace, in full view of all the windows, or climb up the front wall? That’s rubbish, Nelly; you’ve been reading the Sunday papers. And remember, there’s that man on guard, because of Rosamund’s jewels and silver. He’d have seen anyone prowling round. If the twins have gone anywhere, they went because they wanted to, and they can’t have gone far. I’ll have another look in here, and you go through the other attics and down the back stair. Keep shouting, as the others are doing.’

Everybody was calling and searching. Each room had been ransacked by every separate helper. There was no answer and no sign of the twins.

‘I thought they might have crept into some corner to hide from us, and have fallen asleep, though it seems impossible,’ Maidlin thought desperately. ‘They aren’t babies; they’re almost eight! Can they have gone into the garden? But why?’

She had forgotten that she had ever been to bed; or that she had ever wanted to go. She ran downstairs again, really frightened now, and anxious on Joy’s account also.

‘It’s enough to send Joy off her head, after all that’s happened to-day. When Elizabeth and Margaret are old enough to understand, they’ll be sorry they did this.—Oh, Ivor! How is Joy?’

His face told her there was no good news. He opened the library door. ‘Come in here. Call Mary.’ Maidlin’s distraught eyes swept over the array of wedding presents. ‘Could burglars—oh, no, the man’s in charge. No one has been in here.’

Ivor was asking sharp questions of the plain-clothes detective, who was certain he had seen and heard nothing unusual until Lady Quellyn cried out. He refused to leave his duty to help in the search, however. The children must be somewhere in the house; but if by any chance they had been decoyed away, he must not give thieves their opportunity by deserting his post.

Joy lay in a chair, her face hidden, her shoulders shaken with sobbing. ‘Ivor, find them! My babies!’

Ivor stood over her, a glass in his hand. ‘Joy, drink this. They aren’t babies; they’ll be all right, dear. We’ll find them in a few minutes. Drink it all; you need it. Maidlin, you’d better have some too.’

‘I don’t want it. Here’s Mary. What can we do?’

‘Tell us all that happened during the evening. Something may give us a clue. Was anything said to suggest any idea to them?’

‘There was no chance.’ Maidlin dropped into a chair and rested her head on her hand. She had not taken time to dress, and her long plaits, hanging over her pink gown, were very dishevelled. ‘They were in bed when you left home. Nelly was very tired and went to bed about ten, and she says they were asleep then and everything was just as usual. She knew nothing more till she heard Joy scream.’

‘And you and Mary?’

‘After dinner we had the concert, and then we talked for a few minutes, and then we went to bed. Oh, no, not quite! Benney reminded us that she hadn’t brought her night things, and said she’d go and fetch them. We went with her; we went by the tunnel-passage into the Abbey, and she packed her things and we came back. Then we went to bed; she was in Rosamund’s room. I think I slept a little, but very lightly, for I was listening for the car. When I heard you I came down. That’s all.’ She looked hopelessly up at Ivor; there seemed no help in the simple story.

He stared at her, knitting his brows. ‘That doesn’t take us very far. Was there nothing more?’

Benney pushed past Maidlin. ‘Could they have gone into the Abbey? I came with Miss Mary, and I heard what Maidlin said, and I remembered something. The first time I saw the twins, on Sunday morning, they said they’d like to stay in the Abbey with me; and Elizabeth said they were going to hide there one night, and Margaret said they’d take chocolate and biscuits. Rosamund heard them say it too; Maidlin wasn’t there. Could they have heard us go and followed us?’

They were all staring at her. Joy had raised her head, hope and fear in her eyes. The detective muttered something very rude about the twins.

‘I went up to my room to fetch my torch,’ Maidlin faltered. ‘If they were awake—oh, Joy! Ivor! Could they be in the Abbey alone, in the dark?’

‘Oh, come quickly!’ Joy sprang up. ‘They’ll kill themselves! There are a hundred dangerous places, in the dark!’

‘Oh, have I helped?’ Benney cried, as Ivor and Joy and Maidlin ran past her.

‘Just the help that was needed. No one else knew the children had ever thought about the Abbey,’ Mary assured her, as she hurried after the rest.

‘Maid!’ she caught Maidlin’s arm. ‘You aren’t dressed; you can’t go out like that!’

‘I’m sure the children didn’t dress,’ Maidlin said to herself, as she rushed up to her room to fling on her clothes. ‘They’ll die of cold! But another one with pneumonia won’t be any help,’ and with shaking hands she hurried into warm garments and bundled up her hair.

Then, pulling on a coat and catching up her big cloak for Joy, in case Ivor had been unable to hold her back, Maidlin raced down to join in the search.

Ivor and Joy had been delayed by a hunt for lights. Joy’s torch could not be found, and Ivor’s had done good work already; it was no use exploring the Abbey with unreliable lamps.

‘We’ll go by the passage.’ Joy thrust the key into Ivor’s hands. ‘Unlock the door; I’m too shaky. Maid would lock up as she came back, so if the poor babies did follow her they’ll have found themselves locked out.’

‘And it’s nearly two o’clock! Three hours, in that draughty place, in their night things!’ Maidlin’s heart stood still. She followed without a word, but from the look on Joy’s face she knew Joy had realised the danger to the full.

Benedicta caught Mary Devine by the arm, as Mary came running back, sent by Joy to order hot bottles to be put in the children’s beds and to bring wraps. ‘Miss Mary, is the Abbey gate locked? I want to go that way. If we don’t all go together we’ll have more chances of finding them. We can’t search in a crowd! Where’s the key?’

Mary caught up the key, which hung in its place near the passage door. ‘Take poor Nelly with you, Benney; she wants a job, and you mustn’t go alone.’

Benney gave no promise, however. ‘I don’t want Nelly,’ she muttered, as she ran off, torch in hand, on to the terrace, across the lawn, and down the shrubby path to the Abbey gate.

It was very quiet here, after the confusion and shouting in the house. She jumped, as an owl, hooting angrily, flew past her head.

‘The twins won’t like that! I’m sure there are owls in the Abbey,’ she thought. ‘I heard one last night, when Rosamund was wandering round. Last night! It seems weeks ago!’

The shadows of trees and bushes rushed at her in an odd way as her torch lit them up, and time after time she checked herself to look at a black patch in a corner. But none of the dark places held little bodies, and she hurried on.

The Abbey gate was easy to unlock. Benney left it open and ran through the Abbot’s little garden and along the tresaunt to the garth.

It was all very dark and quiet. Joy and Ivor were still in the underground passage.

Benney stood on the garth and flashed her light around.

‘Elizabeth! Margaret-Twin! Where are you? Are you anywhere about?’

There was no answer, and her fears grew.

‘The poor infants will be lying frozen in some corner. We’ll need to search all through the ruins. Where shall I start? Why don’t the others come?’

CHAPTER XXII

THE TWINS IN THE ABBEY

Elizabeth Marchwood sat up in bed; she had been awake for ten minutes, but she felt it had been an hour. She had heard Nelly switch off the light in her room, and she had listened to the last notes of the wireless concert downstairs.

‘Clapping and shouting for Daddy, as usual,’ she mused. ‘Wonder what it feels like? Some day I shall play and the people will clap; I think it will be the ’cello, not a violin. Margaret-Twin likes the fiddle best; it will be more fun if we play different things.—Margaret-Twin! Wake up and whisper! Come into my bed, Twin!’

She crept to her sister’s bed and woke her with a tap-tap of one finger on her cheek. Margaret knew the signal, and opened her eyes and yawned, all without a sound.

‘I’ll come in your bed, as you aren’t quite awake,’ Elizabeth kindly improved on her first plan. ‘Twin, I’ve just decided; I’m going to have a ’cello, as soon as I’m big enough. You can have the fiddle. Then we’ll play things at concerts; Mother or Aunty Maid can be the piano. Don’t you call it a tree-something?’

Margaret blinked at her. ‘Thought you wanted us to do the same thing?’

‘Not always. It will be more fun to be a tree-something.’ Elizabeth’s tone was firm.

‘I’ll think about it,’ Margaret conceded. ‘Perhaps it would be more fun. Funny time to talk about it, though! It’s the middle of the night, Twin.’

‘No, it isn’t. Nelly’s only just gone to bed, and the clapping and screaming at Daddy’s concert only stopped two minutes ago. If you listen you’ll hear Aunty Maid talking to Aunty Benedicta.’

Margaret listened. ‘I’m hungry,’ she announced. ‘What about some of those cakes?’

‘Mother would say biscuits or apples were better. Cakes are squashy in bed,’ Elizabeth said prudently.

‘They’re squashy out of bed too,’ Margaret chuckled. ‘I’m going to find some biscuits. Come on, Twin!’

Elizabeth had already decided that she could not live till morning without biscuits. She flung herself out of bed and groped for her slippers and blue dressing-gown.

‘Whisper, Margaret! Nelly may not be asleep.’

‘Nelly goes to sleep jolly quickly. Mother’s gone with Daddy, hasn’t she, Twin?’

‘You know she came and kissed us and said she was going to town, after all. Said she’d got to go with Daddy to-night. Don’t know why.’

‘Yes, but I was half asleep,’ Margaret argued. ‘I wasn’t sure it was real.’

‘Mother was real. She’d put on her black frock and her hair looked lovely,’ said Elizabeth. ‘And she had the green sparklies that Daddy gave her.’

‘Em-er-alds, Betty-Twin.’

‘Yes, that’s right. But she doesn’t like us to say Betty-Twin and Peggy-Twin. Says it spoils our nice names.’

‘I like Betty-Twin and Peggy-Twin,’ Margaret insisted.

‘Well, so do I. Now creep, Peggy-Twin! We’re mice, remember. Oh!’ and Elizabeth drew her twin back from the door. ‘Wait two minutes! Aunt Mary’s going downstairs. She’s got on her big cloak, like a monk; she’s going out. In the dark—how very funny!’

‘Are the rest going too? Aunt Mary and Aunt Benneyben? If they all go, we’ll have time for a huge feast!’ Margaret chuckled.

‘Come and see what they do!’

The twins crept like shadows to the stairhead, and watched Maidlin, Mary and Benedicta vanish through the door in the wall of the big hall.

‘They’ve gone down the passage! They’ve gone to the Abbey! All in the dark—oh, what fun!’ Margaret whispered.

‘We’ll go too!’ Elizabeth exulted. ‘Twin, it’s our chance. We’ll hide in the Abbey and see what it’s like at night.’

Margaret gave a smothered whoop. ‘Oh, Betty-Twin! Yes, we will; yes, rather! I think the Abbey will be marvellous in the dark!’

‘We’ll put on our plimsolls; these slippers are too thin. And our coats, over our dressing-gowns. I’ll bring Mother’s torch from her room. Fetch my beret, Peggy-Twin. Best put on your knickers, too.’

The preparations took very few minutes. The twins pulled on some undergarments and ran downstairs, comfortably aware that no one would be about, and made a hasty raid on the dining-room, where late supper was ready for their mother and stepfather.

Elizabeth nodded at the closed door of the library. ‘The policeman’s in there, looking after Aunt Rosamund’s toy-shop. I talked to him; he’s a nice man. But if he came out and saw us, he might take us to the lock-up.’

Margaret laughed. ‘Come on quick, then! We don’t want to meet all those people in the passage. Aunt Mary would send us back to bed.’

They knew the passage as well as the corridors of the Hall. Elizabeth held the torch, and they ran down the stone stair and through the second

door, and raced along the tunnel to the Abbey steps.

‘O-o-oh! Cold!’ Margaret said in surprise. ‘I’m glad you thought about coats, Betty-Twin.’

‘Mustn’t say Betty and Peggy too much, or we’ll forget and do it when Mother’s here,’ Elizabeth remarked. ‘Keep at this side, Margaret!’

The steps which led to the ruins had an open edge on one side. The twins kept close to the wall and crept up to the old door, which stood ajar. They had good reasons for not being fond of the crypt, which lay below the stairway.

‘Wonder what those people are doing!’ Elizabeth pushed open the door and led the way out into the chapter-house.

‘They’re in Aunty Ben’s bedroom. I can see the light,’ said Margaret.

‘They’re coming! Quick, Twin!’ In a flash the twins had slipped through the doorway to the garth and into the parlour alongside. It was a long, dark slip of a room, with two lancet windows at the far end.

Elizabeth snapped off the torch, and the children crept to the end of the cell under the windows and crouched in the dark.

‘Would they see our light?’ Margaret whispered.

‘No, they went back for something. It’s all right,—they’re talking. They didn’t see us.’

While the twins held their breath, Maidlin and Mary and Benney crossed the garth, to go back the way they had come.

‘It’s terribly pretty when the moon shines on it,’ Benedicta remarked. ‘But there won’t be a moon till much later than this.’

‘If there’s a moon at all. I think it’s going to rain,’ said Mary, as they went into the chapter-house.

‘Now! Come on, Twin; it’s all safe!’ Elizabeth exulted. ‘Shall we have the picnic first? Or shall we go everywhere and see what it looks like?’

Margaret glanced doubtfully at the blackness of the garth. ‘Seems a pity to carry cakes and apples about, doesn’t it? I could eat them all quite well; my share, I mean.’

‘You won’t get more than your share,’ Elizabeth assured her. ‘I’m not going to sit on the ground. Where shall we go?’

‘Mother always says: “Sit on cushions in the Abbey.” Won’t there be cushions in Aunty Ben’s room?’ The need to fetch cushions before sitting on cold stone had been dinned into the twins from their earliest years.

‘Ought to be. Will they have locked the door?’

‘They’ll be pigs, if they have,’ said Margaret. ‘It’s awfully dark, Twin!’

Her voice was a little uncertain. She looked at the black garth and the blacker shadows under the refectory walls, and drew closer to Elizabeth.

‘That’s what is such fun, Peggy-Twin. Come on!’

‘Yes, of course,’ but Margaret sounded less sure about the fun.

Elizabeth took her arm and marched her across the garth, showing every step by the light of the torch. ‘Now! That’s all right, isn’t it? Here are the cloisters—and the door isn’t locked—and there are cushions. Shall we have the picnic on the bed or outside?’

‘Outside; then we’ll get used to the dark,’ Margaret said valiantly, her courage reviving. ‘Might leave crumbs on the bed, and Aunt Ben would know. We’ll sit on the steps, as we do when it’s sunny.’

They camped on cushions, and Elizabeth divided their spoils with great care. ‘There! That’s fair, I think. Isn’t the Abbey quiet?’

‘It must be terribly pretty when there’s a moon, as Aunt Ben said.’

‘I think terribly pretty sounds terribly silly,’ Elizabeth observed.

Margaret began to laugh. ‘Yes, it does. But Aunt Ben did say it. I suppose we’ve been terribly bad, haven’t we?’

‘Perhaps we have,’ Elizabeth bit an apple as she considered the matter. ‘But we’ve been wanting to see the Abbey at night, and it was such a marvellous chance. I don’t see that it’s so very bad. We haven’t done any harm. We’ll go back soon, just as soon as we’ve been everywhere and seen how different everything looks. We’d better be back before Mother comes in.’

‘I don’t mind, if we don’t see it quite all,’ Margaret said tentatively.

‘Oh, but we mustn’t waste our chance! It may never happen again!’

‘Well, we won’t go down into the old church,’ Margaret’s tone was defiant.

Elizabeth understood. ‘No, I should think we jolly well won’t! I feel just the same. It was worse for me, for I saw you fall into the well, and I had to jump after you and hold you out of the water. You didn’t know what had happened till you woke up in your own bed, hours and hours afterwards.’

‘I know; it was horrid for you. But I felt myself fall backwards and go down the well,’ and Margaret shuddered. ‘It was very beastly. I don’t want to go down there.’

‘Well, we aren’t going, so that’s all right.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘To the refectory,’ Elizabeth said with determination. ‘And then to the day-room and into the dormitory. Come on!’

Margaret sprang up and hurled her cushions into the bedroom. ‘All right! The refectory first!’

It had not occurred to Elizabeth to be careful of her torch. She used it recklessly, keeping it burning all the time. ‘Good thing Mrs. Watson hasn’t a window on this side! She would think it was funny, if she saw a light

wandering about the garth,' she said, leading the way to the refectory stair. 'Look out, Twin! Don't fall up the steps!'

'Won't fall either up or down them,' Margaret retorted.

The refectory was a great cave of blackness. Even Elizabeth was a little daunted, and Margaret drew very close to her as they stood in the doorway.

'There is a bit of light from the windows,' Elizabeth said valiantly. 'I'm going to walk to the end and back, just to show myself I'm not frightened.'

'She's dreadfully brave,' Margaret murmured, and clung to her twin's arm. 'I'll come with you, Elizabeth.'

'I don't like it any more than you do, Twin,' Elizabeth whispered. 'But it would be silly not to go in. There's nobody here but us.'

With real, if mistaken, courage the twins clasped hands and made the tour of the big hall.

'There! That was all right!' Elizabeth cried in triumph.

'Um! Not so bad,' Margaret admitted. 'But I don't really like the day-room, Betty-Twin. Couldn't we leave that out? Why must we go in the day-room at night?'

'Why don't you like it?' Elizabeth asked, with interest.

'There are things there, and noises,' Margaret said vaguely.

'Isn't it only the wind?'

'I don't know. I don't like it in there.'

'We'll just peep in, and then we'll go up to the dormitory. The monks used to sleep there, so it must be all right. They wouldn't keep Things in their bedroom,' Elizabeth spoke with confidence, completely ignoring the lapse of centuries.

They peered into the day-room. It was undoubtedly eerie, with its many window-slits letting in faint gleams of light from the moon which would rise soon.

'It's all right, Peggy-Twin,' Elizabeth began.

Then something rushed at them with a scream and brushed past their heads.

With another scream Margaret fled, away from the light of the torch, which had given her a vision of a black body and brilliant points of light, out on to the garth. The black something screamed again and circled round the walls and arches.

As Elizabeth, terrified also, caught her twin by the arm, Margaret bolted for the nearest doorway. She rushed into the chapter-house and flung herself on the old door which led to home and safety.

'What was it? What was it? Let's go back to bed, Twin,' she sobbed.

'Think perhaps we'd better. Why don't you open the door?' Elizabeth was shaking with nervous fear.

‘Can’t,’ Margaret panted. ‘It won’t come. You try. It’s too stiff for me.’

‘ ’Tisn’t gen’rally stiff.’ Elizabeth seized the handle and tugged.

‘Be quick, Twin! That awful Thing may come in here after us.’

‘Door’s locked,’ cried Elizabeth.

‘Oh, it can’t be! Aunty Maid wouldn’t be such a pig as to lock us out!’ Margaret shouted.

‘Aunty Maid didn’t know we were here. It *is* locked, Twin. It’s always locked,’ Elizabeth said gloomily. ‘Of course, they locked it when they went away.’

Margaret hurled her small weight on the door and began to thump and shout. ‘Open the door! Open it quick! Let us in! Let us out of this horrid old Abbey!’

Elizabeth pulled her away. ‘Nobody can hear you. It’s no use, Margaret-Twin. We’re shut in, or shut out, if you like. We can’t get home.’

‘What do we do, then?’ Margaret wailed. ‘We can’t stay here all night!’

‘Looks as if we’d have to. D’you think perhaps we’ve been rather silly?’ Elizabeth pondered. ‘Shall we go and wake up Mrs. Watson and tell her?’

Margaret’s guilty conscience revolted at the very obvious suggestion. ‘No! We can’t do that. Twin, she’d be wild, and she’d ring up Aunty Maid. Perhaps the garden gate would be open.’

‘Not likely, but we’ll go and see,’ Elizabeth said valiantly. ‘This silly old torch isn’t as bright as it was. I do hope it won’t go out!’

‘That would be a dirty trick!’ Margaret muttered.

‘Come and try the gate,’ Elizabeth suggested. ‘We’re in a regular mess, Twin. We must do something about it!’

‘But that flapping Thing that screams is out there!’ Margaret shuddered. ‘We can’t go on the garth again. We’ll meet it, Twin!’

‘Must do something,’ Elizabeth said again. ‘We’ll creep along by the wall; perhaps it won’t see us. It’s all quiet now. Come on, Margaret! It’s only just past the dormitory door, and then we’ll run down the tresaunt to the garden. If the gate’s open, we’ll be home in two minutes.’

Margaret gathered all her courage together, gripped Elizabeth’s hand, and dragged her at full speed out to the garth. ‘Come on, then!’

Elizabeth tripped on a stone and fell, and the torch went out. ‘Find it,—the light, Twin!’ she cried.

As Margaret groped for the torch, the scream came again, and the black Thing swept past them with another unearthly shriek.

Margaret echoed the cry. In a panic she jerked Elizabeth to her feet, and plunged into the nearest archway. It was the door of the dormitory, and she stumbled up the steps and into the upper room.

‘It won’t come in here! Oh, Twin, what was that awful Thing?’

‘I found the torch,’ Elizabeth panted. ‘But it is going down. Good thing we’re up here safely!’

The torch gave a last flicker and went out. Margaret grabbed Elizabeth, and the twins clung together in the dark, sobbing with fright.

‘Oh, I wish we hadn’t come!’ Elizabeth moaned.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE NIGHT-STAIR

‘It’s very cold,’ Margaret whispered.

‘And dreadful dark.’ Elizabeth’s brave voice shook. ‘We’d best lie close together, to keep warm, Twin.’

They were crouching against the wall, under the first deep, narrow window. The screaming thing had gone, and the Abbey was very quiet.

Margaret shivered. ‘Wish I’d got two coats on!’

‘There’d be blankets and cushions in Aunty Ben’s bedroom,’ Elizabeth suggested. ‘I suppose we couldn’t go and creep into her bed?’

‘But it’s across the garth! That Thing screams at us whenever we go on the garth!’ Margaret cowered in panic against the wall. ‘I won’t go, Twin! I won’t! You shan’t make me! I won’t go near that dreadful garth again!’

‘Oh, very well! We shall have to stay here till the morning, that’s all.’ Elizabeth spread out the skirt of her coat, and invited her twin to sit on it. ‘As close to me as you can, Peggy-Twin. I expect we’ll soon be quite hot.’

Margaret gave a tired sob. ‘Wish we hadn’t been so greedy with the biscuits! I’m hungry.’

‘You can’t be hungry again so soon!’

‘But I am,’ Margaret retorted. ‘I could eat you.’

Elizabeth sighed. ‘Well, you’re not going to! Try to go to sleep. You won’t know you’re hungry, if you’re asleep.’

Margaret tried obediently, but the strangeness and fright were too much for her. She was restless, and kept murmuring that she was cold.

‘I don’t believe you are.’ Elizabeth was very much the elder sister. ‘This is quite a warm corner. There’s a wall between us and the door; we aren’t in any draught.’

‘I am cold,’ Margaret sobbed. ‘I want to go to bed!’

Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders. ‘All right; go! Go and look at the garden gate. It was you who rushed up here.’

Margaret broke into loud sobbing. ‘I won’t! I can’t! Oh, I do want Mother!’

‘Margaret-Twin, be quiet and listen! Will you come to Aunty Ben’s bed, if I hold your hand all the way?’

But Margaret had been really frightened, and nothing would persuade her to face the garth again in the dark.

‘I can’t! I won’t! No, I won’t!’ she wept.

‘Well, will you stay here, if I go alone? I could bring back some cushions and a blanket.’

‘That Thing would get you! You shan’t go!’ Margaret’s terror grew into panic again. ‘If you go, I shall scream till I’m sick!’

‘Oh, all right! I didn’t want to go. If you feel like that about it, I’m not going to bother. It would have been very beastly going across the garth without any torch.’

‘I think you’re a—a hero—a girl-hero; what’s the word?’ Margaret whispered. ‘But I won’t let you do it. I couldn’t stay here alone.’

‘I’ll stay with you, then. But don’t go on saying you’re cold, for I don’t know anything else to do. Tuck your fingers under your arms; that’s a very hot thing to do,’ Elizabeth advised. ‘Now be quiet; if you keep on talking, the Thing will know where we are.’

This horrible idea subdued Margaret into silence, and in a very few minutes she had fallen asleep, as her sister had hoped.

She shivered in her sleep, and Elizabeth grew anxious. ‘She is cold! And I’m cold too. It’s a long time till the morning!’

She peered out of their corner. Everything was very still, and just across the garth there were blankets and cushions.

‘It isn’t so dark now,’ Elizabeth mused. ‘Perhaps there’s a moon coming up. If I could slip out without waking Twin——!’

It was not easy, for Margaret was lying on the skirt of her coat. Elizabeth drew her arms out of the sleeves and let the coat fall, and crept stiffly away from her sister’s embrace.

‘What are you doing, Twin?’ Margaret murmured sleepily.

‘Go on sleeping, Peggy-Twin!’ Elizabeth rose to her feet cautiously.

Margaret stirred and looked up. She found herself alone, as Elizabeth, wrapping her dressing-gown round her, dashed down the stone steps and across the moonlit garth.

Only half awake and quite bewildered, Margaret started up. ‘Twin! Twin, come back! Come here! Oh, Twin, what are you doing?’

‘It’s all right, silly!’ Elizabeth was beside her again, before Margaret was awake enough to follow. She had rushed into the little bedroom, grabbed pillows and cushions and the blanket and down-quilt, and staggered back with them in her arms.

From the garth came the wailing of the startled owl, as it circled among the old walls.

‘Oh, Twin, that Thing might have caught you!’ Margaret sobbed, and clung to her. ‘Oh, you are a brave person!’

‘It didn’t get me, though,’ Elizabeth exulted. ‘Now you’ll be as warm as a little pig in a bed, Peggy-Twin. We’ll lie on the pillows and put the

cushions at our backs. I'll have my coat on again, thanks! We'll tuck the quilt and blanket round us, and we couldn't be cold, if we tried.'

'It's lovely!' Margaret whispered. 'It's terribly lovely! Weren't you frightened, Twin? Wasn't it awful dark?'

'Not so very. There's a dear old moon making a little light.'

'Didn't you hear any nasty Things?'

'Not till I was back again. I believe that noise is only a silly bird, Margaret.'

'It's very horrid,' Margaret quivered. 'I think you're a real hero, Betty-Twin.'

'Now we'll go to sleep!' said Elizabeth. 'I was worried about you before. You're quite warm now, aren't you?'

'Lovely!' Margaret snuggled down contentedly. Elizabeth sighed in relief, and closed her eyes. Her red head drooped on her twin's, and she slept also.

Two hours later Benedicta stood on the garth and flashed her light about. To search the whole of the ruins in the dark seemed a hopeless task.

'There are so many corners! When the others come we'll have to divide and each take—what's that?'

Almost at her side, at the foot of the dormitory steps, lay a tiny handkerchief. Benney sprang to pick it up.

'This wasn't here during the day! "E.M."—it's Elizabeth's; they *have* been here! Are they in the dormy?' She ran up the winding stair. 'Twins! Elizabeth! Margaret! Are you here?—oh, you brute! How you made me jump!'

Her sudden entrance had disturbed the owl. He swept across the dormitory with another appalling screech.

From almost under Benedicta's feet, the twins started up, dazed and terrified. The scream had cut across their half-waking moment, as Benney's shout roused them.

Elizabeth stood petrified, blinking at the light. Margaret fled, with a wild scream, into the darkness.

'Margaret—stop!' Benedicta ran down the long room after her. 'Margaret, don't be frightened; it's me—Aunty Ben.—Oh, you little idiot—*stop!*'

Margaret rushed blindly on. Benney, with a horrible vision of those two unguarded openings—the night-stair to the old church, and the skew-door overlooking the site of the altar—shot after her.

She caught Margaret on the very edge of a yawning gap of blackness, seized her, and hurled her back into safety. Her foot turned under her on the

uneven floor, she staggered, and with a wild cry fell through the doorway of the night-stair and crashed down in the darkness.

The dormitory was filled with lights and voices and people. The party coming from the chapter-house had seen the flash of the torch from the upper windows.

Elizabeth, in her mother's arms, was sobbing and shaking and pointing. 'Twin went over there——'

Joy thrust her to Maidlin and ran to look for Margaret. 'She's here——another step, and she'd have fallen——oh, my darling!'

'Aunty Ben!' Elizabeth panted, struggling in Maidlin's arms. 'She came——with a light; she ran after Margaret. Where is she? Did she fall? Did she go through the night-door?'

'Great Scott! I hope not!' gasped Ivor Quellyn.

Maidlin, very white, put Elizabeth down and ran to the doorway. Even in daylight it was a dangerous spot, with no protection of any kind. She put her hand on the wall to steady herself, for her knees were shaking, and peered out and down, throwing the light of her torch about.

'There's something——something white,' she whispered, as the ray gleamed on Benney's fair head. 'Oh, Ivor, go and see! If Benney is dead——'

'She'll have broken her neck,' Ivor muttered. 'It's a ghastly place.'

He ran back and down the steps, Maidlin at his heels.

'Don't come!' Ivor said sharply. 'I'll see what has happened. I'll tell you. Don't come, Maid!'

'I must come,' Maidlin sobbed. 'This way!'

While Joy, in the dormitory, clasped the twins to her, and Elizabeth and Margaret cried in her arms, Maidlin ran through the gap in the wall and across the site of the church to the sacristy door, leading Ivor, who would have hesitated as to the quickest way.

'There's the doorway,' she panted. 'Down here.—Oh, Benney! Benney!——Ivor, is she——say she isn't dead, Ivor!'

He thrust his torch into her hand. 'Hold them both; keep them steady. Give me all the light you can.'

Maidlin knelt, white and still, and held the torches, while he bent over the little body that lay stretched among the stones.

'She just missed that one. She isn't dead, Maid. Don't faint, child!'——as Maidlin swayed for an instant.

'I won't. It was just the relief,' she said quietly. 'I'll be steady, Ivor. Can you help her?'

His sensitive hands were running over Benedicta's limbs.

'No, I haven't the knowledge. She's alive, but something's sure to be broken. Her head just missed those stones, mercifully. I'll carry her home;

I'd rather not touch her till the doctor comes, but we can't leave her here.'

'Wait a moment!' Maidlin's Camp Fire training in first-aid came to her help. 'We'll bring the mattress from her bed in the Abbey and lay her on it. It will do for a stretcher. We must keep her flat; you mustn't take her in your arms. Cover her up; take this cloak! That's right. Now wait with her while I fetch help. We must have somebody else.'

'Ivor!' Joy was calling from the opening above, the twins thrust behind her. 'What are you and Maid doing? What has happened?'

'Benedicta's here, Joy,' Maidlin called, as she ran for help.

Ivor explained what he supposed had happened, though, like everyone else, he felt very hazy about it. 'She must have tried to save the children and have fallen herself.'

'Margaret!' Joy shuddered. 'She was on the very edge. Oh, Ivor, she might have been killed!'

'Quite!' he said brusquely. 'If this one isn't, it's a marvel. Get those two home and into bed, Joy. Maid and I will see to this child. Are they all right?'

Joy shivered. 'I don't know. They must be chilled through. Come, children! You can walk, can't you? I can't carry you both.'

'Make them run,' Ivor called up to her.

'Mother, where is Aunty Ben?' Elizabeth pleaded.

'Something screamed, and I ran away, and—and something knocked me down,' Margaret sobbed.

'I thought you'd fallen through the night-door, Twin.' Elizabeth tried to keep her voice steady. 'Did Aunty Ben fall, Mother? Did she push Twin down?'

'I don't know what happened.' Joy's arms went round them. 'But you're safe, my darlings. Now we must go home. Are your legs stiff? Oh, that's just with lying still in this cold place. Come along; try to run. Tell me all about it!'

'The torch went done—there was a Thing that screamed at us—we were frightened.' The twins told the story in a tremulous duet.

'Elizabeth was dreadfully brave, Mother. She went for cushions and a quilt. She went all alone in the dark, Mother!'

'Margaret was shivering. I thought she'd catch cold.'

'Bless you, Elizabeth! I expect you saved both your lives. You might have died of cold.'

Joy heard voices on the garth, and knew that Maidlin had met Mary and Nelly and some of the maids, who had followed to help in the search. Grasping Margaret tightly by the hand and bidding Elizabeth cling to her arm, she held the torch and hurried them home by the underground passage.

‘This way!’ Maidlin cried to Mary and Nelly. ‘I want you all here, in the little room.—Nelly, strip the bed and take the mattress and blankets to the sacristy. Mary, show her where I mean. Ivor is there, and Benney; she’s had a terrible fall. The children are all right; Joy has taken them home. All of you, help Ivor to carry Benney to the house; be very careful how you lift her. I’ll follow in a moment. Annie, come with me!’ to a young housemaid.

Leaving Mary to superintend, Maidlin ran out to the cloisters and beat a loud tattoo on Mrs. Watson’s door. ‘Aunty! Let me in!’

Her aunt’s startled face looked out. ‘Maidie! What is it? I heard something.’

‘An accident, Aunty. Give me brandy; there, Annie, take that to Miss Devine. Now the telephone!’ and she rang up the doctor and begged him to come to the Hall as soon as possible.

‘Now I ought to tell her people. Oh, I can’t! Not to-night! I can’t bear it; I can’t do any more.—Aunty!’

Everything went black, and Maidlin swayed, as her aunt ran to her. Mrs. Watson’s arm broke her fall, and the old woman, staggering under the sudden weight, slight though it was, lowered her into a big chair.

‘It’s been too much for ye, Maidie. What has happened?’

Maidlin, struggling back to life, lay in the chair and hid her face, and cried from shock and exhaustion. ‘The twins, Aunty—in the Abbey all night—and Benney’s nearly killed; she fell from the dormitory—she tried to save them.’

Ann Watson could make nothing of it. She hovered round anxiously, put a drop of milk on the oil stove to warm, and looked up in relief as the door opened and Mary Devine came in.

‘Is Maidlin here? Oh, Maid dear, I was afraid you’d break down when you’d done it all. You were splendid, Maid! Give her something, Ann; warm milk? Yes, that’s the best thing. We’ve had a terrible night; it’s enough to make both Maid and Joy ill. Drink this, Maid dear!’

Maidlin lay exhausted in Mary’s arms. ‘Mary, how good of you to come! What about Benney?’

‘They’re carrying her home,—by the garden. There are no steps that way.’

‘But the gate’s locked, Mary!’

‘No, Benney came that way. I gave her the key.’

‘Oh, I wondered how she’d come before us! I’m sorry I was so silly, Mary-Dorothy, but——’

‘My dear, you’re worn out. Don’t talk for a minute or two. Just rest, and drink the milk. You can’t help anybody for a little while; there’s nothing to do till the doctor comes. Ivor will ring him up at once.’

‘I did that. He’ll be here soon.’

‘Oh, well done, Maid! Can you tell us anything about the children?’

‘They seemed all right. They were in the dormitory, and they had pillows and Benney’s quilt; I saw that much. I can’t understand how it all happened,’ Maidlin said anxiously. ‘But they were jumping about; they didn’t seem hurt or chilled. Elizabeth said Margaret had run up the dormitory and Benney had gone after her; and Margaret said something had pushed her down. Mary, she was on the very edge of the night-stair! Another step, and she’d have fallen and been killed. It looks as if Benney saw and caught her, but fell herself. Oh, Mary! If she’s badly hurt, and we have to tell Jim and the father! And her nice mother isn’t better yet!’

‘We can’t do it till we know how much she is hurt,’ Mary said gently. ‘When you’ve rested we’ll go home, Maid.’

‘I can go now.’ Maidlin rose wearily. ‘Oh, Mary! What a day it has been!’

Mary slipped an arm round her. ‘And what a night! It’s almost morning. If the twins could understand, they’d be very sorry.’

‘I don’t suppose they meant any harm. Joy will be worn out, Mary. We must take care of her, or she’ll be ill.’

‘Same for you, Maid dear! We’ll send for a nurse for Benedicta, and put you and Joy and the children to bed for a week.’

‘Oh, not for a week!’ Maidlin protested. ‘I must look after Benney. It’s through me she’s here.’

‘It’s a very good thing she was here. From what I can understand, she seems to have saved Margaret from breaking her neck.’

‘It’s just a wonder she hasn’t broken her own,’ Maidlin agreed.

CHAPTER XXIV

BENEDICTA PAYS THE PRICE

The house was very quiet. The twins had told their story, honestly and with much contrite sobbing, for they knew now that Aunt Ben had been badly hurt, owing to their folly. They had been plunged into hot baths and examined carefully by their mother and Nelly; but they seemed to have taken no harm, so—fed and warm and sleepy—they were tucked up in bed and left to rest.

‘The doctor had better have a look at them, when he’s finished with the other child,’ said Ivor, his tone curt because he was so anxious. ‘Now off you go to bed, Joy;—yes, at once. I’ll see the doctor; and Mary will be there. You can’t help, and you’re worn out, dear.’

‘I shall see the doctor,’ Maidlin said steadily. ‘I feel responsible for Benney. I’ll come and tell you, Joy.’

‘You ought to rest too, Maid,’ Mary remonstrated.

‘I couldn’t, until I know.’ And Maidlin went to the room in which Benney lay white and still, and sank down beside the bed. ‘Oh, Benedicta, you plucky little kid!’ she whispered. ‘You saved us from something terrible to-night. Oh, my dear, I hope it hasn’t cost you too much!’

Mary followed her, anxious for Maidlin as well as for Benedicta, and found Maid on her knees beside the bed. She sat down and put her arm round Maidlin’s quivering shoulders. ‘Be brave, Maid dear!’

‘Mary! She looks—as if——’

‘But she isn’t, Maid; not that. The doctor will be here at any moment now.’

Then Ivor and the doctor came into the room, followed by a nurse whom the doctor had brought. Maidlin started up, her face white, and the doctor gave her a sharp look.

‘I’ll speak to you presently, Miss Maid. Now out of here, both you and Miss Mary!’

Maidlin tried to protest, but Mary drew her away. ‘You’re hindering the doctor, Maidie.’

Maidlin ran from the room, and Mary led her into her own brown-and-gold sanctum and made her sit by the gas fire. ‘Coffee!’ she said firmly. ‘And something to eat. Maid, I forbid you to move from that chair till I come back,’ and she went to pile a tray with food and milk and plates.

The meal did Maidlin good. She looked up at Mary with more courage, a touch of colour in her face. ‘Mary, thank you for looking after me like a mother; I needed it. Now there’s one thing you must do; or Ivor; and that is, answer Rosamund when she rings up in the morning, and tell her we’re all right. It would be hopeless for me or Joy; she’d know from our voices that there was something wrong.’

‘And you’d rather I told a lie to Rosamund?’ Mary suggested. ‘Thanks, Maid, dear! I think Sir Ivor will do it best.’

‘It isn’t really a lie,’ Maidlin urged. ‘We are all right—if the children seem none the worse by the morning. Benedicta is a visitor, and Ros doesn’t know she’s in the house.’

‘That’s true, of course,’ Mary conceded. ‘And you feel Ros mustn’t know about our troubled night?’

‘Not till she’s safely in Scotland, Mary. She’d want to come back to help.’

‘Oh, we couldn’t let her do that!’

‘No. But she’d go away feeling bad about us. She mustn’t know, Mary. I don’t see why she should be told anything about it till she’s home again; she’ll come to see us, and she’ll see for herself that everybody’s all right. I’m sure Benney’s going to be all right, Mary!’

‘So am I, Maid,’ Mary said quickly. ‘I’ll ask Sir Ivor to answer Rosamund’s call, when it comes, and to give the latest news of Rosemary. He can say that you and Joy are still asleep, as a result of yesterday’s excitement and all the fuss at night about Joy’s going to America. Will that do?’

‘Yes, Ros will understand. Tell him to say I’ll write to her later in the day, but he doesn’t want to wake me, or Joy, too soon.’

Mary agreed. ‘He’ll do it. Perhaps Ros won’t guess anything from his voice.’

‘If he’s still worried he’ll be short and brusque, and she’ll say he’s in a bad temper. She’s used to him—is that the doctor?’

Maidlin started to the door, and met the doctor and Sir Ivor just outside.

‘Oh, tell me! Come in here! How is she?’

‘Well, Miss Maid, now I want to look at you, and Lady Quellyn, and those naughty children. Your little friend has broken herself in about a dozen places, but none of them very serious. They’ll all mend with time, anyway; ribs, and an arm, but it’s a simple fracture. I’ve tied her up, and you can trust Nurse Lawson absolutely. Who is the child? I don’t know her.’

‘She was staying in the Abbey for a few days.’ Maidlin leaned against Mary’s big chair for support and spoke urgently. ‘We’ll have to tell her

people; her mother is in Wycombe Hospital, after a motor crash. Can we say Benedicta will get over it all right?’

‘Benedicta! Yes, certainly, she’ll get over it. But it may be a long business. She mustn’t be moved; I suppose you can keep her here?’

‘Oh, yes—yes! We’ll love to keep her till she’s well. When will she know us, Doctor?’

‘I can’t say that. She struck her head and made a bad bruise, but fortunately she didn’t hit any stone, so the injury is slight. The concussion will pass off presently.’

‘The nurse must fetch me. I must be there when she wakes,’ Maidlin said. ‘It’s my doing that she’s here. I must be with her, in case she’s frightened.’

‘A good thing she was here, from what Sir Ivor tells me! You’re going to bed now, my dear, and you’ll stay there till I say you may get up.’

‘I shall go to Benney, when she wakes. But I’ll go back to bed when I’ve spoken to her.’

‘She won’t want to talk. Don’t let her try. I shall bring something for you to take, when I come to see her later on.’

‘I’m not ill. I don’t need medicine,’ Maidlin protested.

‘You’ve had a shock, my dear. One little bottle won’t hurt you. I wish Miss Rosamund was still here, to take care of you all for a few days!’

‘Miss Rosamund doesn’t exist any longer. We mustn’t let the Countess feel we can’t get on without her! Mary will take care of us, Doctor. Will Joy be able to go with Ivor to Amsterdam on Sunday night?’

The doctor looked at Sir Ivor. ‘Concertgebouw? I shall listen, if I’m at home, and if it’s broadcast from the long-wave station. This is Friday morning; if the children are really none the worse for their adventure, there’s no reason why Lady Quellyn should not go, if she feels up to it. She ought to rest completely until then, of course.’

‘She won’t want to let the twins out of her sight,’ Mary remarked.

‘She’ll have to choose; twins or husband,’ said the doctor.

‘They’ll be very good now, Mary,’ Maidlin urged. ‘They had a terrible fright.’

‘Yes, I imagine they’ll be a little subdued for some time. They ought to be. Shall I have a look at them?’ and the doctor went into the twins’ room to see them as they slept, and then went to inspect Joy and to give her his report of Benedicta’s condition.

Maidlin was sleeping soundly some hours later, when the nurse woke her with the news that her patient seemed to be coming back to consciousness. ‘I’m sorry to disturb you, after what the doctor said! But you insisted on being told.’

‘Yes, thanks very much. I want to be there.’ Maidlin threw on her pink gown and slipped into Rosamund’s lavender room through the connecting door.

Benedicta’s brown eyes were wide and frightened. ‘Where am I? Who is she? Am I ill? Oh—Maidlin!’ with a gasp of relief. ‘Oh, what’s the matter, Maid? I don’t understand.’

‘That’s a very kind nurse who is going to help you to get all right again.’ Maidlin knelt beside the bed, noting half-consciously how yellow Benney’s lint-white hair looked against the pillow. ‘Don’t you remember, Benneyben? You’re in your own bed, in the room next to mine. The twins were lost, and you told us where to look for them—in the Abbey, you know; we hadn’t thought of the Abbey. Then you went by the garden, while we were in the tunnel, and somehow you managed to find them, up in the dormitory——’

Benney’s eyes filled with horror. ‘Elizabeth had dropped her hanky on the step—I went to see—they jumped up almost under my feet, and an owl screeched and frightened us all. Margaret rushed away, and—oh, Maid! I remembered the doors at the other end, and I knew she wouldn’t think. I rushed after her,—I shrieked to her to stop—and I caught hold of her. Then—I don’t know.’ She shuddered. ‘I felt myself fall, in the dark. It was beastly! What happened to her, Maid? I tried to stop her; I did all I could.’

‘Dear, you did stop her. You saved her life,’ Maidlin cried. ‘She might easily have broken her neck, if she’d fallen. And so might you; you risked your own life to save Margaret. She’s all right, Benney; you threw her down, quite safely; and then you must have fallen yourself. Elizabeth told us where you were, and Ivor and I found you lying in the grass, outside the door of the sacristy.’

‘My foot slipped on the edge. I felt myself go; it was horrible! Are they both all right? Didn’t they catch cold?’

‘We don’t think so; they seem all right. Elizabeth had fetched your down-quilt and some pillows and cushions. Margaret says Elizabeth is a girl-hero, because she went across the garth all alone in the dark.’

‘Why didn’t Margaret go, too?’ Benney whispered.

‘Because of the owl. It screamed whenever they began to move, and Margaret seems to have got into a panic. She didn’t know what it was.’

‘And my torch startled it and made it screech. No wonder she dashed away! I couldn’t help it, Maid.’

‘You helped more than anybody, Benney dear. Now you must help us still, by being brave and patient till you’re well again. Nurse wants you to go to sleep; she’s coming to send me away.’

Benedicta’s eyes grew startled. ‘What’s happened? Am I hurt? Did I break my leg, or anything?’

‘We were afraid you’d have broken your neck, and that’s a thing that can’t be mended. But you haven’t, nor your back, nor anything that won’t mend again, with a little time and care, you clever girl. If you’ll just do what Nurse and the doctor tell you, and have patience and keep quite still, you’ll be all right again soon.’

‘I’m sorry to be a bother to you.’ Benney’s lips quivered.

‘Bother! You’re the heroine of the whole house, and don’t you forget it, Benedicta!’

Benney smiled faintly. Then her eyes filled with dismay. ‘What about Mother and Father? You’ll have to tell them, Maid.’

‘I’ve been talking to Ivor. He’s going to run over to Wycombe in the car after breakfast, and find your Father or Jim, and tell them the whole story. Your Father will come to see you during the day, if you’ll only go to sleep now, so that you’ll be strong enough to talk to him, when he comes.’

Benney’s face filled with relief. ‘You think of everything, Maid. Tell him I’m sorry I’m hurt.’

‘We’ll tell him the whole story. You’re going to sleep now, aren’t you? When you wake again, Joy will want to thank you for saving Margaret. They’re all asleep just now.’

Benney’s eyes were closing. ‘Good-night, Maid! I feel safe, since you’re here.’

Maidlin sat beside her, holding her hand, until she slept. Then, at a satisfied nod from the nurse, she crept back to bed.

CHAPTER XXV

MAIDLIN IS WANTED

‘There’s something you haven’t told me, Ivor! Please don’t keep it from me. What’s wrong?’ The Countess of Kentisbury’s tone was firm, and she was not so easily satisfied as Maidlin had hoped. ‘Is there bad news of Rosemary? No? Then it’s Joy, or Maid, or the twins. What has happened? Your voice says there’s something the matter.’

Sir Ivor Quellyn, who kept calm before ten thousand people, no matter what happened, lost his head completely.

‘It was the children, Rosamund. They wandered into the Abbey in the dark, while we were in town—followed Maidlin and Mary——’

‘In the *Abbey*? In the *dark*? Oh, the little—the little beggars!—Yes, I want to go on!’—impatently, to the Exchange. ‘Ivor—quick! What happened?’

‘They’re all right, but the other child—Benedicta—is badly hurt. She found them in one of the upper rooms, and just saved Margaret from falling through a window. But she fell herself, and has broken several bones. The doctor has seen her—she’ll be all right, but it will be a long job. Joy and Maid had a terrible shock, and they’re still asleep.’

‘I say, Ivor! Shall I come back for the week-end, and see you through? Geoffrey wouldn’t mind.’ The offer came instantly, as Maidlin had foreseen. ‘It doesn’t matter which day we go on to Scotland. I could be with you in an hour.’

‘They say not; they knew you’d want to come.—Mary!’ he called. ‘Rosamund offers to come. What shall I say to her?’

‘Have you told her?’ Mary ran to the telephone.

‘I couldn’t help it,’ he said ruefully. ‘She knew, and she got it out of me.’

Mary took the receiver from him and spoke urgently. ‘Ros! Mary speaking. You mustn’t think of coming back, Ros. The trouble’s all over now. There’s an excellent nurse looking after Benney, who is going on well. All that Joy and Maidlin need is rest and quiet, and they’re both asleep. The twins have had the fright of their lives, and they’ll be very good for the next few weeks. It’s like you to offer to come back, but there isn’t a scrap of need.’

‘Tell me the story, Mary! I don’t care if it costs a fortune! You know how to put things shortly.’

Mary gave the gist of the night's adventure. 'Maid will write to you to-day. She didn't want you to know.'

'It was like her. You're sure, Mary-Dorothy?'

'Certain, Ros. All's well now. Rosemary too.'

'Your voice carries more conviction than poor Ivor's did! I knew he was hiding something. Had you told him not to tell me?'

'Maid did. She said neither she nor Joy could do it.'

Rosamund laughed. 'Not even Ivor could satisfy me! Don't scold him; I made him tell me. Give my love to them all! I'm sorry not to speak to them, but I do understand. I'm fearfully sorry about Benneyben; she's a jolly kid and I liked her. You're sure she'll be all right? Give her my love, and congratulations on being the family heroine! I've a good mind to tell Geoffrey we must run down to have a look at you all before we start.'

'No, don't do it, Ros. We want to have a quiet day.'

'I shall ring up at night. We don't know how far we'll go to-day.'

'You're all right, I suppose?'

Rosamund's laugh came to her. 'Quite, Mary-Dorothy. Both very happy, and very pleased with one another!'

'Good! Good-bye, Countess!'

Rosamund rang off and sat looking at the telephone.

'No!' she said at last. 'No, it wouldn't do. I'd love to go and take charge for the week-end, and keep them all in bed and be good to them. But they mustn't feel I think they can't do without me; I mustn't give them a chance to say I'm turning into a bossy peeress right away! They'll pull through; they wouldn't like it, if I butted in. But how I'd like to go!—Geoffrey! Those dreadful twins! Just listen!'

'You want to go and see for yourself that they're all right,' said the Earl. 'What about it? We could do it, if you like.'

'I'd like it above all things; but they wouldn't. No, we'll stick to our plans,' Rosamund decided.

Maidlin sighed when she heard the news. 'Poor Ivor! He makes a mess of things, if he can. It's just as well he's not like that on a platform! Has he gone to see the Bennetts?'

'He has, and he didn't like the job one bit,' Mary assured her.

'Where is everybody?' cried a cheerful voice from downstairs. 'Why is no one about to welcome me?'

'It's Jen!' Maidlin leapt out of bed and ran to hang over the stair-rail, still in her dressing-gown, her long black plaits drooping. 'Oh, Jenny-Wren, you've come back to us! Rosemary must be better! Don't shout, Jen! Joy and the twins are asleep. Come up and talk to Mary and me!'

Jen ran up the stair. ‘Maid! Mary! What does this mean? Eleven o’clock, and Maid isn’t dressed—and Joy’s asleep! What have you all been doing?’

‘What haven’t we been doing? I’ve just had breakfast. Come into Mary’s room, and we’ll tell you our adventures,’ and Maidlin closed the door of the brown-and-gold room firmly behind Jen. ‘Now, Jen! Your news first. Tell us about Rosemary.’

‘Doing well; definitely stronger this morning. Everyone is satisfied.’

‘Oh, splendid! You know how we felt yesterday, Jen. We’d have loved to help, but you had Joan.’

‘There was nothing for her to do but comfort me. And there was nothing for me to do but comfort Ken. I felt like an insignificant atom; swept into a corner by all the doctors and nurses. They were very kind, but they did manage to make me feel I knew nothing at all and was completely helpless, and they knew everything and were in charge.’

‘Poor old Jenny-Wren!’ Maidlin said laughing.

‘I never felt quite such a worm before. I was the weeping mother in the background. But it’s all over, and they seem sure R.J. will pull through. Joan was the very greatest comfort, of course. Now what have you people been up to?’

‘We had an awful night,’ and Maidlin told the story of the twins’ escapade and its results. ‘We’ve just been telling the Countess. She offered to come back and see us through, but we couldn’t allow that, and there’s no need. We’re all right now.’

Jen’s eyes had widened as she listened, and now she broke out in dismay, ‘Oh, my dears! What a time you’ve had! What can I do to help? I know; I know what I’ll do! *I’ll lend you Joan!* It’s the very biggest thing I can think of! She shall come and mother you all for a few days!’

Maidlin laughed unsteadily. ‘Oh, Jenny-Wren! You couldn’t make a bigger sacrifice, could you? How lovely of you! But we’ll be all right now, and Joan will want to go home.’

‘She’s promised to stay with me till Monday. They’re getting on quite well without her. You shall have her for the week-end; your need is greater than mine! I’ll ring you up, if I need her; but I shan’t. We shall be all right; now that Ken and I have easy minds we don’t need anybody but one another. I shall go home and tell Joan the story, and she’ll come at once, and when Joy wakes she’ll find Joan in charge and everybody being looked after.’

Maidlin rocked with laughter. ‘Jen, you dear! Joy will love to have Joan for a day or two, and Ivor will be relieved, I know. He has the Philharmonic Concert on Saturday night, and he and Joy start for Holland on Sunday, and he’s been worrying about leaving Joy alone on Saturday, after this shock. He’ll be thankful to have Joan here.’

‘Then that’s settled. What a life! I wouldn’t like his job. Now tell me more about Benedicta. When can I see her? She’s a dear kid; it’s hard on her, but when she realises what she’s done she won’t grudge a few weeks of illness. Will she be ready for school next term?’

‘In May? No, I’m sure she won’t. She’s going to Wood End; isn’t it jolly for her? But not before half-term, I’m afraid.’

‘To be a garden girl in a smock? Jolly for Benneyben!’

‘Or a vet. She wants to nurse sick dogs and cats. You’d better not see her yet, Jen. Her father’s sure to come back with Ivor, to have a look at her; and that will be enough for to-day.’

‘Let me know when I can see her, and I’ll come. I’d like to thank her for saving Margaret-Twin; and also for being the bearer of my bulletins yesterday—Joan told me. Now, Maid! What about Joy and America?’

‘Well, Jen, she’s going, when Ivor goes.’

Jen nodded. ‘Sure. She’s married him. You know, Maid, Joy’s never really come up against what it means to be married, until now. With Andrew, her married life was all honeymoon.’

Maidlin agreed soberly. ‘You mean, she never had to learn to fit in?’

‘To adjust to her husband’s ideas,’ Jen said thoughtfully. ‘To give in sometimes; we all have to do it, on both sides. Joy never had to learn it with Andrew; they were all the time travelling and seeing new things and having a holiday. They never settled down to the serious business of living together. He was taken from her, and the chance was gone. With Ivor it’s a very different matter.’

‘I suppose that’s true, Jenny-Wren.’

‘I’m four years younger than Joy, but I’m an old married woman compared to her! She’s only learning what marriage means. Of course she’ll go with him, wherever he goes and whatever she has to give up.’

‘She feels that,’ Maidlin remarked. ‘She said herself that people matter more than things or places.’

‘Poor old Joy! She’ll feel it, when she has to leave home.’

‘We’ll all feel it; we haven’t decided about the rest of us. We meant to talk it over to-day.’

Jen looked at her thoughtfully. ‘If you decide not to go to America, will you come and live with me, Maid? You’d be the greatest possible help and comfort. To have somebody always there, besides Ken and Nurse and the maids, would be a great relief.’

Maidlin’s face lit up. ‘Jenny-Wren, you are a dear! I’ve said it before, I know; but you are. To make me feel I’d be really useful, and that you really want me! It’s lovely of you, Jen. And last night, as soon as ever she heard,

Rosamund asked me to go to her; she says I can look on Kentisbury Castle as an extra home.'

'Oh, well! My little Manor House would go into a corner of Ros-Countess's Castle! We can't offer you anything like that!'

Maidlin laughed. 'You know I'd be terrified of the Castle. But I'd like to be with Ros. I might take over the Rose and Squirrel from her! I don't know yet what Joy will want, Jenny-Wren.'

'She'll want you to go with her; I can tell you that. But you may decide not to go.'

Maidlin shook her head. 'I don't know. It all seems a muddle at present.'

By the time she had dressed, Joan had arrived. She walked in and put down her little suit-case.

'Jen says I'm to mother you all for a day or two. Is that right, Maid?'

'Marvellous, Joan dear! Ivor's come back, and he is so glad to hear you're coming. He brought Mr. Bennett, and they're looking at Benedicta now; she's asleep, and they won't wake her.'

'Is she doing well? I liked her so much; she's a plucky child. She's very fond of you, Maidie.'

'She's a dear kid! She's going on all right.'

'Maid, I've been thinking about you,' and Joan paused, on her way up to Joy's room. 'Jen told me Ivor's plans. This new idea will leave you stranded, if you don't go to New York. I suppose I couldn't persuade you to come and live with us at Rayley for a time? With John and Jansy at school and Baby still only a baby, I'd be so glad to have company. Will you come?'

Maidlin looked at her, her big black eyes wide and bigger than ever. With suddenly flushed cheeks she came across the hall and stood looking up at Joan on the staircase.

'Did you talk to Jen about me, after she'd been here?'

Joan looked startled. 'No, Maid. There wasn't time. The doctor came and Jen went to hear his report. Why?'

'Because Jen asked me to go to her,—and Ros asked me to go to *her*! You are kind, all of you!' Maidlin cried. 'If I don't go with Joy, I shall have to choose, and you're all so nice to me that it will be very difficult! I really believe each one of you wants me, and it's the loveliest thing that could have happened to me! Thank you so terribly much, Joan!'

'You'll have to take us in turns,' Joan said laughing. 'I should live with the Countess, if I were you, and visit all the rest of us. She has always been your pal. But spare some time from Kentisbury for our humble little homes, Madalena!'

'It will need a great deal of thinking about,' Maidlin said, her eyes shining. 'But it's marvellous to know you'd all like to have me!'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RETURN OF THE COUNTESS

The Earl and Countess of Kentisbury, after some quiet weeks in their castle by the loch, and a few busy days of touring through the North of Scotland and of sightseeing in Edinburgh, drove up to the Hall early one afternoon and surprised a family party on the terrace.

Mary, her proofs sent off, sat with a basket of mending at her side. 'All my stockings and odd jobs are flung out of sight, when I have a working spell,' she often explained. 'When the book is finished, a dreadful day of reckoning comes. But actually I find darning rather soothing, after reading proofs or typescript.'

Maidlin was reading aloud to the twins and Benney, at the other end of the terrace. 'So that Mary-Dorothy can lose herself in a dream about her next book,' she had said, as they arranged their chairs and cushions.

Benedicta, rather white still, lay on a couch in the sunshine. She could use her arm a little now, but she could not raise it far without pain, and she had to admit that gardening would be out of the question for some time, and that she was not likely to wear her Wood End smock and breeches before the autumn term.

She was the first to see the car. 'Somebody's coming, Maid. Don't they know Joy's away? I thought we wouldn't have visitors while we were alone.'

Maidlin stared at the car. Then she started up. 'It's Ros! That's Geoffrey's car! She's come to see us on her way home! Oh, splendid! Oh, Mary-Dorothy dear, will you order tea?' and she went racing down the steps to meet the car. 'Oh, Ros! How marvellous of you to come!'

The twins hung over the stone balustrade of the terrace and cheered, while Mary hurried indoors, and Benney sat up carefully, her face eager.

Rosamund, looking brown and well, sprang out to meet Maidlin. 'Maid, we wanted to come, on our way. We spent last night in town, and we're expected at the Castle this evening, but we had to see you all first.'

'Grand homecoming of the Earl and his bride! Triumphant arches and flags, and crowds of tenants with bouquets! Addresses of welcome, and bonfires, and the village band! Reporters, and pictures in the papers, I suppose!' Maidlin said, laughing.

'I'm afraid so. What I want is to get home to my Roddy. It's weeks since I saw him, and it feels years. Roddy is what matters; we'll have to endure

the rest.'

Maidlin gave her hand to the Earl. 'I say! You do look well! Being married seems to suit you both!'

'Shall we tell her?' Rosamund laughed at her husband. 'We can tell the others again later. Maid, we spent the night in town so that we could see Sir Richard King. He says Geoffrey is stronger and better than he'd ever have believed he could be, and there's no reason why he shouldn't live an absolutely normal life in every way.' Her eyes blazed in triumphant joy.

'Oh, Ros dear! That proves you were right to marry him! You have been good for him!' Maidlin cried, her arms round Rosamund's neck again.

'I'll prove it more fully yet!' Rosamund's happy tone made Maidlin look quickly into her eyes and then hide her face against her friend's arm.

'Ros, I am so glad for you both!' she whispered.

'You may well be glad, Maid dear. Where's Joy? I want her and Jen to see Geoffrey. They were just a little bit doubtful about my taking on an invalid husband! I want them to see he has vanished.'

'Oh—Ros!' Maidlin cried. 'You've had no letters while you've been touring. Ros, Joy went off with Ivor yesterday morning! We're feeling so forlorn!'

'Went off? Where to? When will she be back?'

'In the middle of June,' Maidlin said mournfully. 'She's gone to New York, Rosamunda.'

'My—aunt! And left everything and everybody? Even the naughty twins and you, Maid?'

'We aren't naughty,' Margaret protested. She and Elizabeth had left Benedicta and come racing to greet Rosamund. 'Aunty Ros, we're not naughty. Not really!'

'Only en-ter-pris-ing,' Elizabeth said carefully. 'Daddy said it, Aunty Ros. "Your en-ter-pris-ing daughters," is what he said to Mother.'

'There was something else,' Margaret added. '"Ad"—what was it, Betty-Twin? "Ad-ven-", something or other.'

'Oh yes! I forgot that bit. "Ad-ven-tur-ing," I think it was.'

'Adventurous, Elizabeth,' Maidlin suggested.

'Enterprising and adventurous! You made a bad mess of your adventure last time, didn't you? How is poor Aunty Benneyben?'

'Oh, getting better! We're being terribly good to her,' said Margaret.

'We're taking every possible care of her,' Elizabeth added. 'That's what Mother said we must do.'

'I hope you are,' Rosamund said gravely. 'Maid, what do you mean? Joy said she was letting Ivor go alone this time, as it was only a business trip of a few weeks, and she didn't want to take the children for such a short while.'

‘She decided to stay at home with them,’ Maidlin agreed. ‘Then at the last minute she felt she couldn’t let him go alone. She came down one morning, saying she must go with him and he must manage it somehow; and he had a wild day ’phoning to the shipping company and making arrangements. They’d had one or two berths returned, and they were able to fit her in, and we all turned to and got her packed up somehow. You see, Ros, Ivor’s to give one concert during this trip, and she wanted to be there.’

‘His first New York show. She couldn’t bear to miss it,’ Rosamund assented, her face grave. ‘Poor old “Traveller’s Joy”! It was a dreadful choice for her. I’m glad she’s gone; she’d always have regretted it, if she hadn’t been there to meet all the new friends at the very beginning. But it must have been terribly hard for her to leave home, and the children and you, and Mary and Jen! Did she feel it very much?’

‘Very badly,’ Maidlin’s face was grave. ‘We all felt very bad yesterday. She ’phoned from Southampton, just before they went on board. But she’d have felt worse if she’d let Ivor go off alone.’

‘You are a forlorn little family! I’m glad we looked in to cheer you up. Shall we take you all back to Kentisbury with us?’

‘No, Ros dear, not this time. You mustn’t arrive back from your honeymoon with a large family! We shall be all right. Joan and Jack and Baby are coming to stay with us presently.’

‘That’s a jolly idea! Then you aren’t going to the Manor? Won’t Jen have the twins? Or perhaps Kenneth won’t put up with such enterprising and adventurous people?’

‘The Manor’s no good just now. Jen has taken Rosemary to the Grange, to get strong again in the air from the moors, and Kenneth and the boys are there too.’

‘Worse and worse! Is there nobody left at home?’

‘Nobody but Mary and the twinnies and me. We’re taking care of Benedicta, as they told you.’

‘How is she?’

‘Much better; come and speak to her. She’s going home in a week or two.’

‘How is your mother, Benneyben?’ Rosamund stood on the terrace and gazed down at Benedicta. ‘You don’t seem too bad, but I can’t say you look as jolly as you did last time I saw you.’

‘Are you used to being a Countess now? You were very new when I told you about Rosemary.’

‘More or less. It still feels rather like a fairy-tale.’

‘The Castle will seem more like a fairy-tale than ever,’ Maidlin suggested.

‘I expect it will. How are you, really, Benedicta?’ and Rosamund sat on the edge of the couch, throwing back her travelling coat and pulling off her hat.

‘Oh, tons better! Look!’ and Benney raised her arm cautiously. ‘There! I can lift it quite a long way now; I’m terribly proud! And my side doesn’t hurt a scrap.’

‘Splendid! You have been clever! And your mother?’

‘She’s in Devonshire, getting strong again. I’m going to her next week. I could go now, but the doctors—both hers and mine—say we’d better be apart for a little while longer. They say she’d try to do things for me, and I’d want to do things for her.’

‘Very likely! And you aren’t too unhappy here?’

‘It’s not too bad,’ Benney retorted. ‘Lady Rosamund, you know how I love being here!’

‘Lady Rosamund!’ Elizabeth remarked. ‘Sounds like Mother. Is that you, Aunty Ros?’

‘I always thought she was *Miss* Rosamund,’ cried Margaret.

‘Who ran away from an owl? Who was frightened in the dark? Who wouldn’t go across the garth at night?’

‘Elizabeth did!’ Margaret shouted. ‘Betty-Twin was very brave. She brought pillows and a quilt for me.’

‘Peggy-Twin didn’t know it was only an owl, Lady Rosamund,’ Elizabeth protested.

Rosamund sighed. ‘Benneyben, why did you put that dreadful title into their heads? “Lady Rosamund” isn’t correct, anyway; it’s Lady Kentisbury! Maid, please talk to them and make them understand I’m still Aunty Ros!—Oh, here’s Mary-Dorothy! So you’ve lost Joy, Mary! Did your poor book ever get finished?’

‘In time. It had bad luck, hadn’t it?’ Mary laughed, as she arranged the tea-table. ‘Being married seems to suit you, Ros. How well you look!’

‘Oh, I know I’m brown! We’ve been boating and sailing on the loch; we’re going back to Scotland every year. But look at Geoffrey! He’s well, if you like! I’m very proud of him.’

‘I don’t wonder. He looks very different.’ Mary smiled at the Earl, who was coming up the terrace steps.

‘He feels very different,’ said Lord Kentisbury. ‘For one thing, he’s been lonely all his life, and he isn’t lonely any more.’

‘That’s a good beginning,’ Mary agreed.

‘Benneyben, when are you going to Wood End?’ Rosamund asked. ‘I want to give a party to the school; I’ve invited them to come for a whole day’s picnic, to see the Castle and the park and the dogs and the farm and

the dairy. It will be all in the way of business for Wood End! They ought to see how Kentisbury does things. But we haven't fixed the date, and I'd like to wait till you can be there too.'

Benney's face lit up. 'How terribly nice of you! I don't know when I'll be allowed to go. The doctor's afraid I should do too much, if I started too soon.'

'Let me know when anything is decided. I won't ask the girls just yet,' Rosamund promised. 'Perhaps we'll be able to wait for you.'

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TORCH

‘Are you coming to live with us this autumn, Maid?’ Rosamund asked, as she took the cup Mary handed to her and accepted a plate from Elizabeth and a scone from Margaret. ‘I suppose Joy will take the children, when she goes back for the winter. She’ll need your help, Mary! What about your writing?’

‘The skies won’t fall, if I have a year without bringing out a book,’ Mary said. ‘I shall go, if Joy wants me. But nothing is decided yet.’

‘Valuable experience for you,’ Rosamund remarked. ‘You’ll come back full of “copy” and new ideas. Will you go too, Maid?’

‘Ros dear, I don’t know,’ Maidlin said quietly. ‘Nobody knows; Joy doesn’t know herself how soon she’ll be able to settle down. The only thing that’s certain is that we’ve been stirred up and everything will be different. It will be a long time before we’ll be quietly at home, all together, as we used to be. Ivor has engagements in London and on the Continent; he’s been able to alter some dates, to bring them as close together as possible, but even so, he’ll have to come back two or three times during the winter, and Joy wouldn’t want to be left in New York. If she doesn’t feel too lonely without us this time, she may decide not to take the children until she and Ivor are more settled. Or she may stay here herself, some of the time; she spoke of doing that. It’s difficult to say what will happen.’

Maidlin’s eyes had a far-away look, as she remembered a very private talk Joy had had with her, on the night before she left home. ‘One thing is certain, Maid,’ Joy had said. ‘If all goes well, I shall be at home during November and December. Ivor agrees, so that’s settled. It’s one point fixed, anyway.’

Maidlin turned to Rosamund. ‘Joy hopes to be at home for a time, in November. Perhaps she won’t take the twins till after that.’

A look passed between them, and Rosamund nodded. ‘Well, Maid, you know we want you, if it ever happens that Joy doesn’t need you.’

Maidlin’s colour rose. ‘Oh, Ros, it was marvellous! You were the first; but both Jen and Joan have asked me to go to them. They didn’t arrange it together; they really want to have me.’

‘You won’t be left stranded! But remember I was first. I want you, Maid.’

‘I’d love to live in your house, Ros! But we’ll have to wait. In the meantime, and while Joy’s away this summer, we’re going to have people staying here—the Rayley folk, as I told you; and Elspeth; and Gail.—Oh, Ros! We didn’t put it in our letters, because I wanted to tell you myself. Ros, Gail’s engaged!’

‘Not to be *married*?’ Rosamund cried. ‘Engaged as what? I’ve engaged her—for my tuck-shop! Maid, whatever do you mean?’

‘I mean to be married. She said she wouldn’t be engaged for three years, but she and Jimmy have gone ahead so fast that——’

‘Maid, do stop!’ Rosamund pleaded. ‘I haven’t an idea what you’re talking about! Gail’s only seventeen; she hadn’t the faintest intention of ever being married, when I last spoke to her.’

‘I don’t suppose she had. No, of course she hadn’t. But Jimmy had! It happened to Gail all in a minute. She won’t be married before she’s twenty, Ros.’

‘I should hope not! I’m still gasping! Who is Jimmy? And where did she find him?’

‘Look at Benney’s face!’ Maidlin said laughing.

‘Not——? Benedicta, not your brother?’ Rosamund cried.

‘I’m going to have Abigail Ann for my sister. We’re all terribly pleased about it, and Jim’s working like a horse!’

‘But I thought Jim was silly about you, Madalena di Ravarati! What does all this mean?’

‘I handed him over to Abby Gail.’

‘Much more suitable!’ Rosamund commented. ‘You have thrilled me to the limit! Tell me all about it quickly!’

‘And they met again at my wedding dance?’ she said, when she had heard the story. ‘I’m glad I helped to bring them together! I’ve always had a soft corner for Abigail Ann! Oh yes; she must come to stay with you and her future sister-in-law!’

‘I’m terribly keen on Gail,’ said Benney.

‘Rachel and Damaris will be here part of the time,’ Maidlin went on. ‘And I hope Bidy will come and bring Madelon Marie; it’s months since I saw my godchild. We shan’t be lonely, Ros.’

‘A series of house-parties; a jolly good idea. It will keep the enterprising and adventurous daughters of the house interested and out of mischief,’ Rosamund observed. ‘Well, Maid, dear, come to me when you have time; you know I want you. So Abby Gail has found a new job for herself! I’m still stunned and gasping.’

‘She grew up all in a moment, when she saw Jim’s face and knew what he wanted. I saw it happen,’ said Benedicta.

‘It does make a difference, to know a man feels like that about you,’ Rosamund assented. ‘You’ll have to be the next, Maid. We’re all leaving you stranded. Can’t you find somebody, and start a home and a family circle of your own?’

Maidlin’s sensitive colour rose. ‘I don’t think I shall ever marry.’

‘Oh, we all say that! I did; Joy did. We all feel it’s impossible, until we meet the right man.’

‘Yes,’ Maidlin said quietly. ‘And I’ll know I’ve met the right man when I find somebody I like better than Joy, or you, or Jen. But I can’t imagine such a person existing.’

Rosamund looked at her in amusement. ‘Quite right, Maid! Don’t marry him unless you like him a great deal more than you like Joy, or me, or Jen. Or suppose we say, unless you like him in quite a different way. But he may exist, and if you meet him, you’ll know.’

‘Perhaps. But I shall have to like him in a very extraordinary way before I’ll be willing to go away from home for him,’ Maidlin retorted. ‘I think, perhaps, I’ve been too happy; I don’t want anything different. I don’t believe I could be any happier.’

‘Oh well, perhaps you won’t marry,’ Rosamund said soothingly. ‘Lots of people don’t; there’s no reason you should, if you don’t want to!’

‘I don’t want to at present. I’m sure of that.’

‘It’s a very good thing for us all that you don’t,’ Rosamund said seriously, handing her cup to Margaret and her plate to Elizabeth. ‘Come with me into the Abbey for five minutes, Maid! Then we must go and meet the cheering population of Kentisbury with gracious smiles and dignified approval! It is a fag; I wish we could go home quietly! Twinnies, find Uncle Geoffrey and tell him I’ll be ready in ten minutes. He’s gone round to the garage with our chauffeur-boy; such a jolly lad, Maid! He’s driven us wonderfully all over Scotland.’

‘He’s Uncle Earl,’ said Margaret.

‘She doesn’t mean your driver,’ Elizabeth added.

‘Cautious Lisbeth! I didn’t suppose she did. Uncle Earl, if you like; but Uncle Geoffrey sounds kinder.’

‘Cautious Lisbeth!’ Margaret chuckled in delight. ‘What’s my name, Aunty Ros?’

‘Mad Margot,’ Rosamund informed her. ‘And together you’re the enterprising and adventurous daughters. Now go and fetch my car!’ and she turned to the Abbey gate with Maidlin.

As they stood on the garth, looking across at the refectory and the chapter-house, Rosamund remarked, ‘My wedding picture! I wanted to see it

once more. I shall look at it often at home. Kentisbury will have to be home for me now; I must give up this dear place.'

'You'll have a jolly time unpacking your toy-shop. I hope everything will have travelled safely.'

'Oh, I'm sure they'll be all right. Maid, *what* a good thing you don't want to marry!'

Maidlin stared at her. 'Why, Ros? You said it before.'

'Because you're the only one of the real family left. All the rest of us have new responsibilities, and we must give ourselves up to them—I to Kentisbury—Joy to Ivor and his music—Jen to her delicate Rosemary and all the others. Joan has gone completely, though I know she was a great help to Jen and you lately. You're the only one of us all who is free from other claims; I haven't forgotten your Italian estate, but I can't believe you'll ever decide to live in Italy altogether. You're still free and able to carry on—to bear the torch. We've had to pass it to you. You're the Torch-Bearer for the family, as well as for your Camp Fire, Maid.'

Maidlin looked at her, something eager coming to life in her great black eyes. 'And what is the torch, Ros?'

'Something there has always been about this place; a spirit of welcome—and helpfulness—and kindness. You feel it as much as I do; you were helped and welcomed when you needed it, just as I was. You lived up to it when you took Benedicta and mothered her in her trouble. And when you dashed up to Cumberland to rescue Rachel and Damaris; and when you brought Bidy and her baby home—it was all the same thing. I can't put it into words, but it belongs to the Abbey, and we've all tried to carry it out. Now it's up to you.'

Maidlin's pale cheeks flushed suddenly. 'Could it be the right of sanctuary?' she spoke in a low voice. 'The Abbey was holy—sanctuary—refuge for people in danger, even if they were guilty. Are we, without thinking about it, bringing back the old rights and the old spirit, by welcoming anyone who is in trouble?'

Rosamund gave her a quick eager look. 'That's a beautiful thought! Mary-Dorothy would understand; she was rescued and welcomed. So was Cecily Perowne; so was Nelly Bell. But nobody else has time for it now. It's for you to bear the torch, Maid. We've had to lay it down.'

Maidlin drew a long breath. 'I begin to see a meaning in things. I was feeling a little lost and forsaken. Rosamunda, you've pointed the way. I'll try to bear the torch.'

'You're doing it already, my dear,' Rosamund said quietly.

PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Maidlin Bears the Torch* by Elsie J. Oxenham [Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley]]