

**THE ABBEY
GIRLS
ON TRIAL**
**ELSIE J.
OXENHAM**

THE ABBEY GIRLS ON TRIAL



COLLINS



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THE ABBEY GIRLS
ON TRIAL

by
ELSIE J. OXENHAM

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING ROSEMARY JANE

The Squirrel Tea-house was empty. Audrey, in a pretty green overall, stood gazing across the flagged courtyard to the lane. She was tired after a busy afternoon, and her face was clouded with disappointment.

She glanced across the flower border, where pink and purple lupins and larkspurs of every shade of blue were massed against a low wall. Beyond it she could see the London road, and a green bus, from which passengers were streaming.

“Elspeth has lost the bus. Bother! And all that washing-up to do! Oh, I can’t!”

She dropped into a chair and lay gazing at a pansy bed.

“‘Dead pansies!’ It’s needing attention, and the blue border needs weeding. And I ought to write to Eleanor. It’s Elspeth’s turn, but she’ll scribble a line at the last moment or else lose the mail. I don’t suppose she has lost the bus. She’s still reading in the library, or mooning along by the sea. She’ll never remember it’s Mrs. Davy’s day off.”

Audrey was twenty-seven, while Elspeth was only seventeen. It was a big gap, but was bridged by Eleanor, who came exactly midway between the two. Six months before, Eleanor had been invited by a friend to be her guest on a trip to India and Ceylon. Audrey had urged her sister to go; but the responsibility of the Squirrel House had been heavy, and she was hoping Eleanor would come home before the busy season began.

“Though Eleanor wasn’t as much help as she should have been,” Audrey thought. “Still, she was some one to talk things over with. Elspeth is such a babe! I wonder when she’ll begin to grow up? Eleanor didn’t think, either; didn’t think about business, at least! But she was good fun; she’s had a ripping time in India, and no wonder. She’s good company. But Elspeth has her nose in a book half the time.”

She was watching for the postman, for Eleanor’s weekly letter was due.

“The washing-up must wait; I can’t stand! It’s jolly to have people here, but it does keep me running about. Still, we’re doing well. I’m not really whining. Alice!” she called, to the girl who was on duty in the kitchen during the busy hours, “Alice, you can go. If any one comes I can manage. We’ll wash up later.”

The postman and the next bus came round the corner together. Audrey rose and went down the path to meet the man.

As she took the letter, Elspeth came running up the road.

“Audrey, I’m sorry I’m late. It’s such a gorgeous evening that I dropped off the bus at the farm and went into the big field, and then I hid under a bush and kept ever so quiet, and—oh, Audy! All the baby rabbits came out and went on with their games! They never knew I was there. I’ve been longing to watch them play. And there was a cock pheasant—such a lovely colour!—and two little brown wives. You didn’t mind, did you, Audrey? Is that Eleanor’s letter?”

“Yes, we’ll read it together. Come and sit in the garden.”

“Did you mind my watching the rabbits?” Elspeth glanced at her sister’s face. “It was so clean and fresh out in the fields, after being in class all day. There was no harm in it, was there?”

“No harm in the rabbits,” Audrey agreed. “But I was hoping you’d hurry home. I suppose you forgot it was Mrs. Davy’s night off?”

Elspeth’s face fell. “I never thought about the washing-up. I am a pig! I say, Audy, I’ll be ready to help in two ticks. I’ll fetch my pinny, and we’ll attack the scullery together. You read Eleanor’s letter and tell me about it while we’re tidying up. It will be all about her dances and tennis, and the people who took her out in their posh cars. She’ll never settle down to give teas again! Cutting bread and butter and washing cups! She won’t like it.”

She ran into the cottage and clattered up the narrow stair to her attic room.

“Eleanor will be coming home soon,” she said to herself, as she threw her books on the bed. “I’d rather be alone with Audrey. Eleanor’s so horribly sarcastic when she tries to be clever; people call it smart, but it’s hateful to live with.”

She was very like Audrey, with the same short fair hair that waved of its own accord, and the same steady blue eyes, though hers were dreamy, while Audrey’s were keen and quick. Elspeth slipped on a lilac overall and ran down to the garden.

“I’ll struggle with the chaos in the sink before you come, Audrey. There’s always—Audrey, what’s the matter?”

Audrey had dropped the letter and sat gazing at her with dazed eyes.

“Eleanor’s married,” she said. “I don’t believe it, but she says so.”

“Married?” shouted Elspeth, and dashed for the letter. “To that old man she’s been going about with?”

“I never thought she was in earnest,” Audrey said unsteadily. “She made a joke in her last letter; don’t you remember? If Mrs. Porter insisted on coming home, Eleanor said she’d marry Geoffrey Kane, so that she could stay in Ceylon; he’d asked her often enough, she said.”

“But does she mean married? Not engaged?” Elspeth cried.

“She says she’s married. Read it, and tell me if I’m going silly.”

“She does say it. Seems to mean it, too. Then she won’t be coming home—not ever. I say, how odd!”

“Odd!” said Audrey. Her voice broke, and she turned away hurriedly.

Elspeth looked at her, bewildered and frightened. “I don’t understand,” she faltered. “Are you upset about it, Audrey? It’s very nice for Eleanor, and we’re doing all right without her, aren’t we?”

“We could do all right, if—if only you”—Audrey’s voice shook. She dropped her head on the arm of the basket chair. “I can’t go on! Eleanor was better than no one. There’s nobody to help. You’re such a baby, with your rabbits and fields, when there’s work to be done! You never think—and there’s nobody else. I can’t go on for ever all alone.”

Elspeth stood rigid. Then she turned and fled. Her mind was numb with dismay, but habit took her feet to the scullery, and she set to work feverishly on the first thing that came to hand. With eyes blinded by tears, she groped among the piles of cups, sorting saucers from plates, and spoons from knives, putting the cups ready beside the tin bowl. She stumbled to the kitchen and brought the kettle and poured out the hot water.

The scullery was full of steam. Through the cloud came Audrey’s voice. “Elspeth, I’m sorry. I was a brute.”

“Please go away,” Elspeth gasped. “I want to do something useful. Oh, Audrey, I never thought!”

The tears were raining down her cheeks. She dashed them aside and twirled the mop furiously in a cup.

Audrey laughed unsteadily and put her arm round her shoulders. "Elspeth, you're a little brick! You can't help being the beginning of a poet, can you? It was hateful of me to blame you."

"Isn't this steam a nuisance?" Elspeth sobbed.

Audrey laughed again, and caught up a tea-cloth. "Let's do our job! Then we can talk in the garden. We must write to Mrs. Kane."

"Mrs. Kane? Oh, my hat!"

"Yes, my dear. We've several new ideas to absorb. Elspeth, there's no reason we shouldn't manage all right without Eleanor."

Elspeth reddened. "If only I could be sensible and be company for you. Audrey, I didn't see it before. I'll try. It was mad of me to watch those rabbits; but you can't think how sweet they were! Did you have a busy afternoon?" She changed the subject hastily.

"Packs of people. One party of a dozen, who had just come off the hills and were starving."

"I say, Audrey, he's an awfully old man for Eleanor, isn't he?" Elspeth exclaimed.

Audrey's face grew sober. "I don't like it," she confessed. "He's fifty-nine, and she's twenty-two. It isn't right."

"Thirty-seven years! Might be her father. Oh, how—how like Eleanor!" Elspeth set down a pile of saucers with a bang.

"Don't smash the crockery! Eleanor's chosen, and we can't do anything. She knew we wouldn't like it, so she didn't tell us she was in earnest."

"She must have married the old man in a great hurry," Elspeth said.

"Don't keep calling him that. He's not really old."

Elspeth began to empty tea-pots. "Oh, no! Not quite sixty. Audrey, it's hateful! Looks as if Eleanor would marry any one who asked her."

"She liked Ceylon and she wanted to stay there." Audrey's voice was grave. "I said I didn't like it, Elspeth. Eleanor didn't want to come home and settle down, so she took this other way. I hope he'll be good to her."

"I should beat her."

"Els!" Audrey cried laughing. "You'll have to send a wedding-present."

"Not if I know it!"

"Oh yes, you will! We'll read the letter again; I didn't finish it. When you ran away, I forgot the letter."

"Perhaps at the end we'll find it's all a joke."

"I'm afraid not. Come and—oh, bother!"

"Oh, my aunt! People!" Elspeth sighed. "What a time to want tea! I wish you'd put up a notice—'Not open after six.' Shall I go and ask what she wants?"

Audrey had heard footsteps in the paved courtyard. She glanced through the doorway, then exclaimed, "No, I'll go. It's Mrs. Raymond. She comes for coffee before her Institute class; she teaches them country-dancing."

"I've heard you speak of her, but I've never happened to see her," and Elspeth watched with interest from behind the cretonne curtains.

Mrs. Raymond had left her hat and coat in her car, and had come bareheaded into the Squirrel courtyard. Her bright bronze hair was braided round her head and shone in the sun; she wore a brown jumper suit, and she was tall and pretty. Her brown eyes were eager as she spoke to Audrey.

Elsbeth approved. "I like her! She looks jolly and—and sunny and alive!"

"Oh, Miss Abbott!" Mrs. Raymond was saying. "I'm expecting two friends at any moment. Do you mind if we use your garden for a family gathering? We'd like tea, and—if it isn't too much bother—something to eat; eggs, or cold meat. The girls will have had a long drive and they'll be late home. Shall we be a great trouble to you? I'm afraid it's rather late."

"Not at all. You shall have anything you like. Is the class later to-night?" Audrey asked, moving two small tables together to make a larger one.

"There isn't a class. This is a family affair. You're wondering why I don't have the girls at Rayleigh, aren't you?" Joan Raymond asked laughing. "I'm in quarantine; or rather, the house is. My small girl has just begun going to school, and she's promptly taken measles. The girls I want to see come from a family where there are twins of four years old, so they can't come near a house full of measles! But we agreed that if I disinfected thoroughly and we met in the open air, there couldn't be any danger. So I told them to come here, this being the nicest tea-garden I've ever seen."

Audrey laughed. "How sweet of you! You shall have the jolliest high tea I can manage."

"I told them they could trust you to feed us well. I'm aching to see them and to hear—but that won't interest you."

"Everything interests me," Audrey assured her, arranging basket chairs round the tables, under a big green umbrella.

Joan laughed. "There's a new baby in the family, and I want to hear all about her. We've talked quantities over the 'phone, but I want to hear more still. There's the car!"

She went quickly down the path, and the sound of voices and excited laughter came from the big car at the gate.

Audrey spread green tablecloths and began to lay plates and forks. Inside the cottage, Elsbeth dashed to the stove for a glance at the kettle, then sprang back to the window to see the new arrivals.

"A perfectly lovely kid, Joan! An angel for goodness, and Jenny-Wren's as well as anything, and frightfully bucked to have a girl."

The speaker was a tall fair girl in blue, with blue eyes, and yellow hair coiled over her ears under a white hat. She was twenty-two, six years younger than Joan Raymond.

Joan laughed. "And I suppose Jen's still more bucked to be the first of us to have three kiddies, although she was the last to be married! Are the boys quite well?"

"Oh, rather! Jolly as anything!"

"Jen's changed her mind about having only boys," said a slightly younger girl, whose very black eyes and hair gave her a foreign look. She wore a vivid orange suit under a brown fur coat. "She always said she'd have six boys. But she's tremendously pleased with Rosemary Jane."

"What?" cried Joan. "Maidlin, say it again!"

"Oh, hadn't we told you?" the fair girl began to laugh.

"Rosemary Jane," said Maidlin.

"Really? Rosamund, is it a joke?" cried Joan.

"Jen says it isn't. She's called the babe Rosemary Jane from its first yell," said Rosamund.

"She didn't tell us, though," Maidlin remarked. "Nurse says it's been decided all along, but Jen wouldn't be serious about it. She told us quite solemnly the kid was to be called Janet Mary——"

"Yes, you told me Janet Mary," Joan agreed.

“Then the next day it was Amelia Alice, to match Andrew and Antony. And then it was Rose Madeline, for Rosamund and me. So then we gave up believing anything Jen said,” Maidlin explained.

“Perhaps Rosemary Jane is a joke too?” Joan suggested.

“Nurse says Jen really means it this time,” Rosamund threw her hat on a table and sat down in one of the basket chairs. “What a dinky place! But where are the squirrels?”

“Over the porch,” said Audrey, coming forward. “What will you have to eat? I’ll go and cook it for you, as my girl has gone home.”

Rosamund looked at her—pretty green overall, wavy fair hair, straight blue eyes—and laughed. “I’m sorry I didn’t see your squirrels! What a jolly garden you have! It’s too bad to make you cook, when you’d finished for the day. Couldn’t we have bread and butter and cakes?”

“You could,” Audrey assented. “But I’d like to scramble eggs for you. Mrs. Raymond says you’ve come a long way.”

“I’d like scrambled eggs,” said Maidlin.

“Scramble us heaps of eggs, please, Miss Abbott,” said Joan, and sat down by Rosamund. “Now, Ros, tell me all about Rosemary Jane! Is she called after you and Mary-Dorothy?”

“Mary-Dorothy and I say so,” Rosamund agreed. “But according to Jen, Rosemary has always been her favourite name, and Kenneth’s too; she says we’d think too much of ourselves if she called the kid after us. Jane is for herself, and you, and that Jehane person in the old stories of the Abbey.”

Joan laughed. “But why Jane? It’s so very plain!”

“Jen says perhaps Rosemary Jane will be plain too,” Maidlin observed. “But she’s lovely so far.”

“Is she really dark, or were you teasing when you told me?” Joan asked.

“Oh, dark as Maid,” said Rosamund. “Looks weird beside Jen. The whole family’s fair. I think Rosemary Jane is a changeling.”

“She isn’t as dark as all that,” Maidlin remonstrated. “Her eyes are beautiful, Joan; deep brown. Her hair’s dark brown. Nurse says it may change, but Jen doesn’t think it will. The boys were fair from the first.”

“But how queer to think of Jen with a brown baby!”

“Joy says the kid’s the image of what Andrew was,” Rosamund remarked.

“I forgot her Uncle Andrew,” Joan’s voice sobered. “The grandmother was dark too, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. The kid’s like her. Jen says she’s glad it’s a little brownie.”

“Jen was Queen Brownie at school,” said Maidlin. “When Rosemary Jane goes to school, she’ll be Brownie the Second.”

“Goes to school!” Rosamund laughed. “She’s a fortnight old! How’s Janice, Joan?”

“Oh, nearly well! It’s a very slight attack. Jansy was too healthy to take anything badly. But I expect she’ll have given it to John. We’ll know in a few days.”

In the cottage kitchen Audrey and Elspeth could not help hearing every word.

“Is John Mrs. Raymond’s little boy?” Elspeth whispered.

“I suppose so. Will you take out this tray?”

“Oh, won’t you?” Elspeth shrank. “They might speak to me.”

“You babe! What if they did?”

“I shouldn’t know what to say.”

Audrey looked at her, and took up the tray.

Elspeth, colouring, sprang forward. "I'll go, Audrey. I was only ragging. No, that's not true. I don't want to do it. But I will; I want to help."

"Thanks, my dear." Audrey gave her the tray of cups and saucers, and began to break eggs into a bowl.

Elspeth carried the tray carefully out to the garden and set it on a little table. She began to arrange the cups in front of Mrs. Raymond, her eyes shyly downcast.

"Another pretty pinafore! Why did you go and change, Miss Squirrel?" asked the fair-haired girl, Rosamund. "I'm sure there was nothing the matter with the green one?"

The girl in the lilac overall did not answer, but went on arranging cups and saucers.

Rosamund looked up in surprise. "Did you mind—why, it's another girl! A littler Miss Squirrel, isn't it? How many more of you are there?"

Elspeth's cheeks were flushed, as she answered. "There isn't anybody else; not now. Just Audrey and me. Our middle sister's married."

"I've never seen you before, have I?" Joan asked. "You're very like your sister."

"She's been crying," Maidlin woke out of a dream and spoke absent-mindedly.

Elspeth set down her tray and fled, through the flower-filled courtyard, past the cottage, and into the garden behind. Her lilac overall betrayed her among the gooseberry bushes.

"Maid, you idiot!" cried Rosamund. "Did you think Joan and I hadn't seen? How could you, when you'd never seen the kid before? How could you be so brutal?"

Maidlin was gazing with dismayed eyes after Elspeth. "I never meant—I wasn't thinking—I am sorry! I woke up suddenly, and I just said it. Oh, Ros, what can we do?"

"Leave her alone. We'll apologise to her sister," said Joan, looking distressed. "Perhaps the little one will come back before we go."

"I'm not going to leave it. I'll have it out with her," and Rosamund sprang up. "I hope she can't escape through the back hedge."

She strode across the flagged yard, as Audrey came to the cottage door.

"Ros, don't tease her! It's unkind," Joan cried.

But Rosamund had passed Audrey and was hurrying through the garden.

Audrey came up to the table, and Maidlin and Mrs. Raymond both spoke at once.

"We're so sorry——"

"Please, it was my fault," Maidlin insisted bravely. "I went off into a dream; I often do. I think it was your pansies; they reminded me of our Abbey. Your sister came, and I woke up and said the first thing that came into my head. It was unkind. I'm very sorry. Will she let me tell her so?"

"Elspeth is shy. She didn't want to wait on you, but she did it to help me," Audrey explained. "I'm sorry, too, but we had an upsetting letter just before you came and Elspeth took it rather hard. She isn't really a baby, but she can't answer back, as some girls would do. She's a dreamer too," and she smiled at Maidlin. "I know just how it happened. It's exactly what Elspeth would do herself. Your friend seems to have captured her; she must be a genius. I thought Elspeth would be through the gate and into the woods."

"Rosamund's a friendly sort of person, and she never minds anybody," said Joan.

"Do you think I might go and speak to Elspeth?" Maidlin's voice was ashamed and wistful. "I'd like to say I'm sorry."

"Let Ros do it for you," Joan advised, as Audrey went back to her eggs. "Don't ask the kid to face any one else for a few minutes."

“Ros always does things for me. She always pulls me out of holes.”

“It’s good for you to have to do without Ros now and then, Madalena,” said Joan.

“I know,” Maidlin said. “I creep out of things so long as Ros is here to do them for me. Jen and Mary have both told me so.” She sprang up and began to wander restlessly round the courtyard.

The yard in front of the cottage was paved with big slabs of stone, and in the cracks between them were tiny rock-plants. The tall blue lupins and larkspurs were massed in borders beside the low walls; in green tubs standing on stumpy pedestals were pansies of every colour. At one end of the courtyard, at right angles to the whitewashed cottage, was a shelter which had once been a shed but was now a loggia with climbing roses and clematis clinging to its pillars. There were creepers and roses on the cottage walls and framing its windows, and pansies in the beds below. Big yellow and green umbrellas protected the wicker tables and chairs, and the cushions and table-covers were to match these.

“We can’t quite make up our minds about the colours,” said Audrey’s voice, and Maidlin turned, to find their hostess beside her, carrying a tea-pot. “Elsbeth says a green cloth and cushions should be under a golden umbrella, and gold cushions under the green. I want the green under the green, and the gold with the gold. She says her way is more exciting.”

“That’s certainly true,” Joan agreed with a laugh, from where she sat in a low chair. “Where did you find that old sign-board over your porch, Miss Abbott? I’ve often meant to ask you. It’s a real old one, isn’t it?”

Audrey set down the tea-pot under a green raffia cosy, and glanced at the ancient sign, of two squirrels playing. “It belonged to an old inn, which once stood in the woods here. The house was burnt down and never rebuilt; we discovered the sign in a cottage and bought it. We had already called our place after the inn, so that the old name shouldn’t be forgotten; and also after the squirrels in the woods, of course! Yes, the sign is old and really good.”

Maidlin came forward shyly. “Couldn’t I help? Your sister has left you to do everything, and it’s my fault. Couldn’t I cut the bread and butter?”

Audrey laughed. “Thanks very much, but I can manage. I must see to my eggs,” and she hurried indoors again.

Maidlin sighed, and glanced down the garden at Rosamund and Elspeth, still standing among the gooseberry bushes.

CHAPTER TWO

SUPPER AT THE SQUIRREL HOUSE

“I say!” Rosamund caught Elspeth by the arm. “Maid’s going to feel awfully bad about this! Don’t be too hard on her. She goes off into dreams; you can’t expect her to think like an ordinary person. She’s a singing genius, and she has an artistic temperament and all that sort of thing.—Don’t tear your pretty apron on those thorns!”

Elspeth had darted off again, but a gooseberry branch had caught her. She stooped to loosen her overall from the thorns, and her fair hair fell on her cheeks and hid her face.

“Maid will feel dreadful,” Rosamund said again. “She thinks about things afterwards, and wonders why she did it and what she should have done, till she drives me nearly crazy. I shall have an awful time with her unless you tell her it’s all right. Be a sport, and save us from that, Miss Squirrel! I don’t know your name. Will ‘Miss Lilac Squirrel’ do?”

“It doesn’t sound pretty—a lilac squirrel. I’m Elspeth,” Elspeth’s voice was unsteady.

“That’s pretty! And your sister—isn’t she Audrey? That’s prettier than ‘Green Squirrel.’ Don’t you ever forget what you’re doing, Lilac Squirrel? Maid’s dreadful.”

Elspeth’s cheeks burned. “Audrey’s always telling me off for dreaming. What do you call her—your friend? Maid? What does it mean?”

“Short for Maidlin, which is short for Madalena. She was Maidie as a kid, but now I call her Maid. Does that gate lead into the woods?”

A wicket gate in the hawthorn hedge had caught Rosamund’s eye. She wandered down the path, and stood gazing into dark depths of woodland.

“That’s where the squirrels live,” Elspeth said shyly.

“Couldn’t we slip through and see them? But it wouldn’t be fair to the others. Do you watch the squirrels sometimes?”

Elspeth’s cheeks burned again. “Yes, and the rabbits. I do it when I ought to be helping Audrey. I ought to go and help her now.”

“Wait another sec.! You will forgive Maid, won’t you? She’ll be so dreadfully cut up. She’s keen on girls; she’s a Camp Fire Guardian, and all that sort of thing. But she’s dreamy too, and sometimes her temperament lets her down. She never meant to hurt you. She’d hate to hurt a caterpillar.”

Elspeth’s eyes were fixed on a point in the depths of the wood, where a red-brown body with a bushy tail had darted across the fallen leaves.

“Look! Did you see?” she whispered, and caught Rosamund’s arm and pointed. “Look, up the tree like a flash!”

“Rather! He was a pet! What a fascinating place!”

“We love it. There’s a pond among the trees, and little paths. It’s best in the early morning or at night.”

“That’s like our Abbey,” Rosamund agreed. “It’s really our own when there are no trippers. We’re very glad for them to see it, but we like it best when they’re not there.”

“That’s how we feel about the woods. Where is your Abbey? Is it a ruin?”

“Grace-Dieu. Yes, a very fine old place. It belongs to Joan—Mrs. Raymond, you know.”

“Her very own?” Elspeth’s eyes widened.

“All her own. She comes to see if we’re taking care of it properly.”

“Why doesn’t she live in it?”

Rosamund laughed. “Because she’s married. She lived in it before she was married. It was rather romantic; she made friends with the old man who owned it, and he left it to her.”

“And do you live in it now?” Elspeth gazed at her, fascinated.

“Oh, not in the Abbey! There are only three rooms. I have slept in it,” Rosamund said laughing. “We live at the Hall, with Lady Marchwood; the Abbey is in the grounds of the Hall. Lady Marchwood is Joan’s cousin.”

Elspeth looked puzzled. “Is it Lady Marchwood who has the new baby—Rosemary Jane?”

“No. Yes, of course it is. Not that one, though! Oh, my hat! It’s too complicated!” Rosamund groaned, as Elspeth stared at her. “Don’t worry about our family, Miss Lilac Squirrel. There are two Lady Marchwoods. The one we live with has lost her husband, so the title went to his brother. Ours has twin girls of four years old, Elizabeth and Margaret. Rosemary Jane belongs to the other Lady Marchwood, also Andrew and Antony. They all live next door to us, at the Manor.”

“It seems rather mixed,” Elspeth admitted. “I’d love to see the Abbey. But I must go and help Audrey, Miss—Marchwood, is it?”

“Oh no! I’m only an adopted friend. I’m Rosamund. Joy Marchwood adopted Maid and me when we were school kids, because our people were abroad. Then Maid lost her father and I lost my mother, and we just stayed on at the Hall. I have a father, but he’s been abroad for years. He doesn’t really know me. He isn’t half as real to me as the Abbey crowd.” Rosamund’s tone was intentionally light, to cover a sore place in her heart.

“It must be horrid to feel like that,” Elspeth spoke with shy sympathy as they went up the path together.

“Oh, rotten! But there’s no help for it. I don’t care as much as I might do, because Joy and the rest are such tremendous sports. They’ve made me feel they want me to stay with them always. I don’t suppose I shall, but I do feel the Abbey is home. I’ve lived there since I was fifteen.”

“I’ll take tea out to your man in the car,” Elspeth paused at the cottage door. “That will help Audrey and be easier than waiting on the others,” she finished in her heart.

“There isn’t any man. I drove the car.—Miss Green Squirrel!” and Rosamund stood in the doorway and called to Audrey. “Elspeth and I are going to be your waitresses. But you ought to lend me a blue pinafore.”

Audrey was cutting bread and butter. She laughed and nodded. “There’s a clean one in that press.”

Rosamund dived into the cupboard with a whoop of triumph. “Blue, for me! Come on, Elspeth! You and I will carry things out. What shall I take, Miss Green Squirrel?”

Audrey laughed again, and handed her the bread and butter. “I’ll bring the eggs. Elspeth, the warm plates.”

“It’s a procession!” Rosamund proclaimed, and bore the tray aloft. “Couldn’t we sing a triumphal song? We want Jen and her pipe!”

“Maidie, sing the Helston Furry!” Joan Raymond suggested laughing, as the procession, led by Rosamund, circled among the tables by a round-about route and at last stood in a ring round her chair, presenting their offerings.

Maidlin sprang up and helped to arrange the table. Her eyes sought Elspeth’s shyly.

Elspeth felt her look and raised her eyes and smiled bravely, in a friendly if watery effort.

Maidlin's face filled with relief. "Thank you so much. I couldn't have enjoyed my tea," she whispered. "And I'm starving. It all looks so nice."

"Don't let the eggs go cold," Audrey warned her, and drew Elspeth away. "Come and clean the egg-pan, my child!"

"Oh, let it soak! It will be easier," said Maidlin unexpectedly.

In blank astonishment Audrey gazed down at her. Rosamund lay back in a chair with a shout of laughter.

"Maid, you are the limit! Miss Audrey knows all about washing-up."

"But it's true," Maidlin said stoutly, colouring a little. "It will be easier if she doesn't do it at once."

"It was jolly decent of you to think of it," Elspeth said, in eager gratitude. "You wanted to save me trouble, didn't you?"

"'Cleaning the egg-pan' was only a figure of speech," Audrey explained, a twinkle in her eyes. "I meant 'clean up the mess in the kitchen.' Our afternoon washing-up isn't finished yet."

"I'm sorry. I thought you meant it," Maidlin reddened. "I've been practising washing and cleaning up lately, for Camp Fire honours; and I found out about soaking pots, and not putting soda into aluminium saucepans. So when you told Elspeth to clean the pan——"

"It was too much for your housewifely mind," said Joan.

"My mind isn't a housewife. That's why I have to work so hard at my Home Craft stunts," Maidlin sighed.

"We don't understand about Camp Fire and Home Craft. But there isn't time for you to tell us just now. Eggs for you, and washing-up for us," Audrey's voice was firm. "Elspeth will bring you more bread and butter and cakes presently."

The sisters went together across the flags of the courtyard, Audrey determined, Elspeth reluctant. She went so slowly, indeed, that she heard Rosamund's exclamation, as she served the eggs—"Joan, what topping people! Why did you never bring me here before? Fancy keeping a dinky place like this all to yourself! I'm going into those woods before I'm much older!"

Elspeth came out presently with a big tray. Rosamund sprang up to help her.

"I must live up to my blue pinafore. Yes, please, I'd love to. Joan wants more hot water, if you have any."

Elspeth set cakes on the table and laid a green plate and a green-handled knife before each guest. "Would you like fruit salad? We haven't any ices left." She looked at Joan and Maidlin, her shy eyes brave.

"I'd love fruit salad!" Rosamund assured her.

"May we?" Maidlin looked up, shyly also. "Will it give you much trouble?"

"Bring us anything you have," Joan said laughing. "These children are still hungry."

"Those cakes are enough to make any one hungry," Rosamund protested. "Does the Green Squirrel Lady make them herself?"

"Audrey's cakes are always good," and Elspeth escaped to the cottage again.

"She's a little sport. She's as shy as——"

"As a squirrel," said Maidlin. "It's nice of her not to be frightened of us."

"She's frightened, but she won't let her sister down," said Joan. "Poor kiddy! It's difficult for her."

“She wants shaking up. Then she’d grow out of it,” Rosamund remarked. “Which is your sploshy cake, Maid? I could be quite happy with about six off that plate.”

“I should be most unhappy if I had six,” Joan suggested.

“Oh well——! Isn’t this dinky china? Mary and Jen would go wild over this place. We’ll have to bring them.”

The fruit salad disappeared as quickly as the cakes, and then Joan rose to go. “No time for more to-night. Good-bye, Miss Abbott! It has been a delightful evening and we’re very grateful. You’ll see us here another time.”

“Oh, rather!” Rosamund agreed. “The Squirrel House hasn’t seen the last of me!”

Maidlin looked at Elspeth, an unspoken apology in her eyes. As the cars set off down the lane, she looked back and waved her hand to Audrey, who was leaning over the gate. Then she gave a special wave to Elspeth, standing in the doorway under the climbing roses and the Squirrel sign.

CHAPTER THREE

A NEW RELATION

“What a jolly party!” Audrey turned from the gate. “I’ve always liked Mrs. Raymond, and she seems to have friends as nice as herself. Now for the mess in the scullery!”

“I must clean the egg-pan,” Elspeth began to laugh.

“You shouldn’t be so easily upset,” Audrey scolded gently. “They must have thought you a real baby.”

Elspeth reddened. “I’m sorry. I hate myself. But I was afraid I’d cry again.”

“I was afraid the other girl would upset you when she went after you.”

“She’s Rosamund. She didn’t say her other name. She was kind; I didn’t mind. She told me ever so much about them, and the old Abbey where they live,” and Elspeth changed the subject. “It belongs to Mrs. Raymond,” and she repeated as much as she had understood of Rosamund’s explanations.

Audrey was not listening very carefully, however.

“Come and read Eleanor’s letter again,” she said, as she hung up her tea-cloths. “We didn’t finish it.”

Elspeth sat on a cushion in the paved front yard, leaning against a chair, while Audrey read the letter aloud. Eleanor gave details of her hurried wedding, to which she had agreed because her friends were leaving for England. Then came a hasty postscript.

“Oh, I say, girls! I forgot to tell you that I’m a stepmother! Isn’t it a scream? I haven’t seen the girl, as she’s in England; but Geoff has a daughter and she’s as old as I am! She’s living with friends who have had her for years. Perhaps we’ll come home in a year or two, and then I suppose she’ll live with us. I’m not looking forward to that, I must say. I’ll send you her address next time I write, and you can go and call on your new relation.”

Audrey laid down the letter and looked at Elspeth.

“A new girl!” Elspeth said. “How odd!—I say, Audy, if she’s nice, and as old as Eleanor, could she come into the family instead of her? I’m fed up with Eleanor. I don’t like the way she speaks about it all.”

“She’s over-excited,” Audrey suggested. “Don’t be too hard on her. It must be thrilling to be married suddenly. She’ll be all right when she settles down.”

“If this girl’s nice I’d rather have her for a sister.”

“Sister! You’re her aunt, my dear.”

Elspeth looked up, startled. “Her aunt? But she’s five years older than I am!”

“That has nothing to do with it. You’re her aunt by marriage. Your sister is her stepmother.”

“It’s simply hateful for her!” Elspeth broke out. “A new mother no older than herself! She’ll hate it!”

“I shouldn’t wonder. I’d hate it. I don’t think she’ll live with them,” Audrey pondered the situation. “I wouldn’t. If it meant going out as a housemaid, I’d do that rather than live with a stepmother of my own age. If this girl has any grit, she’ll strike out for herself.”

“She might come and live with us!” Elspeth’s eyes sparkled. “She’d be company for you. I know I’m too much of a kid, Audrey. You ought to have somebody sensible to talk to.”

"I'm not complaining, so long as you keep wide awake, my dear," Audrey said. "It's when you go off into dreams that I feel let down and alone."

"I won't! Audrey, I won't! But wouldn't you like to have somebody besides me?"

"We must see our new niece first," Audrey began to laugh. "We may be terrified of her."

"Our niece! How funny it sounds!"

"But if she has no better plan, I shall certainly feel we ought to ask her to join us," Audrey added.

"Perhaps she'll stay with the friends she's been living with."

"Perhaps. But she may have been expecting to live with her father. If that should be so, I'll feel we owe her something."

"Yes, because Eleanor's bagged her father and her home," Elspeth agreed. "I think we ought to join up with her."

"I wish we knew her name! It's so silly to have a nameless relation!"

"It's just like Eleanor," and Elspeth rose and stretched herself. "Can you spare me for ten minutes, Audrey?"

"Squirrels? Yes, run along; but don't be late. It's nearly dark."

In the twilight Elspeth wandered through the gate into the woods. It was dark here, but she knew the paths and she loved the silence and the shadows. There were queer little murmurs from sleeping creatures, rustlings of leaves, an occasional call from a night bird, and the imperative hooting of owls.

A broad track, easy to follow even by night, led her to the pool, just where a stream ran in and was crossed by a plank bridge with a wide handrail. Elspeth sat on the rail, swinging her legs, and gazed at the dark water, and thought of the new relation.

The unknown girl's position came upon her strongly, for she had imagination enough to see her point of view. "It's horrid for her. I wonder how long it is since her mother died? If she doesn't remember her own mother, she may not feel so bad, but if the mother died a year or two ago it's awful for this girl. I wish I'd kept Eleanor's letters. She said something about this man before, but I didn't pay much attention. How was I to know she was going to marry him?"

She stretched a long leg and kicked at the water. "Hateful! Eleanor doesn't love him a scrap. She's married him for what she'll get out of him. It would serve her right if he died and left her nothing to live on . . . Then she'd come back to us. I don't want her; not after this! She's done something that I loathe, marrying an old man like that!"

Full of romantic dreams as she was, the news of Eleanor's purely business marriage had been a severe shock. Elspeth was not old enough to make allowances; all her sympathy went out to the girl whose rights in her father had been ignored, and she had none for the newly-married pair.

"I wonder if they told her—the girl? Did she have any warning? Or will it have been a ghastly shock to her? I wonder if she cared about her father? Didn't Audrey say she hadn't lived with him for years?"

And thinking of the unknown girl introduced so suddenly into the family, Elspeth went soberly down the path and back to the Squirrel House and bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

MAIDLIN'S APOLOGY

"Elsbeth has Eleanor heavily on her mind," Audrey thought more than once, during the next few days. "She can't throw things off. I feel Eleanor has made a mistake; but we can't do anything to help her now. Even if her husband gives her money and a position, she's lost something; for she doesn't pretend she loves him. How could she, with nearly forty years between their ages? She's chosen to do without love, and she'll regret it. But it won't help her for us to be unhappy."

Elsbeth's classes in the seaside town to which she went by bus closed three days after the arrival of Eleanor's startling letter. She had left school the summer before, but had been working at shorthand and book-keeping at a secretarial college, so that she should have a second subject if the Squirrel House should ever close its doors. Her heart was not in the work, but she was a good student and had made progress.

Now she felt that everything was changed, however. She came in on the last day of term, and threw her books on the kitchen table.

"Are you there, Audrey? I'll help to washup. Audrey, I needn't go back to the office, need I? You do see that things are different now, don't you?"

"Because Eleanor is married?" Audrey fetched a rubber apron and went to the sink.

"Of course. We aren't expecting her to come back and help you now."

"We certainly are not," Audrey agreed. "And you think it's your job to take her place?"

"Well, isn't it? You can't do it all. Three of us weren't needed, so you thought I'd better learn something else. But now I want to work here, along with you."

Audrey twirled her mop in a cup. "Are you sure? You've made a good start at your shorthand. It's a pity to lose it unless you feel certain you'll stick to the Squirrel. It means cooking and cleaning all day long. I'd love to have you. But are you sure you'll like it?"

"Certain. If I don't I'll stick to it, all the same. But I shall like this, Audrey. In any case, I ought to be helping you."

"Then you shall, my dear. I'm very glad you feel like that," Audrey said. "I wouldn't have asked you to bury yourself here among the woods. It seems so much more thrilling to go in to town and to see the sea every day; and you aren't much more than a kiddy. You ought to be with other girls—and boys. I didn't want to defraud you of your rights."

"We'll see plenty of people here," Elspeth remarked. "I don't want cinemas and dance-halls and the pier. I like the sands, but I loathe the prom. You could hardly walk along it for the trippers to-day."

Audrey laughed. "Poor trippers! Their one day at the sea in the whole year!"

"I know. I try to remember that. I don't mind their being on the prom., but I don't want to be there too——."

At a tap on the outer door they both looked up in astonishment.

"May I come in?" a shy voice asked. "There doesn't seem to be anybody anywhere. You aren't away, for I can hear you washing-up."

Audrey and Elspeth hurried out, Audrey looking puzzled. Elspeth's eyes were excited and her colour had risen.

In the doorway stood the dark-eyed foreign girl, Maidlin, in her orange suit and cap. Her hands were full of red and pink and yellow rosebuds.

“Why, it’s Miss—we didn’t catch your name,” Audrey exclaimed.

“I knew your voice,” Elspeth smiled a shy welcome.

“How nice of you to remember! I’m Madalena di Ravarati, but I don’t expect anybody to remember that. So I’m just Maidlin, please. These are for you,” and Maidlin thrust the roses into Elspeth’s hands.

“They’re lovely! But why—oh, you aren’t thinking I really minded what you said? You couldn’t think me such a baby!” Elspeth cried.

“I know you did mind. I was unkind, and I was sorry,” Maidlin spoke impetuously. “I couldn’t say it before the others, and Ros had made it all right. She always helps me out of holes. I’m afraid I keep her busy! But I thought about it afterwards, and I was sorry I’d been horrid to you.”

“Oh, but you weren’t! It was I who was silly,” Elspeth stammered, quite overcome.

“I was thoughtless, and I hurt your feelings. I asked Joy what I’d better do, for she saw I was worried. Joy? We live with her and the twins; she’s Lady Marchwood, and she’s my guardian. I’m only twenty-one, and they decided I mustn’t be of age till I’m twenty-five. I’m glad,” Maidlin confessed. “I feel more like seventeen. I don’t want to be of age. I like leaving all the business to Joy. I wish they’d made it thirty!”

“Will there be so much business?” Audrey asked laughing. “And have you come alone? Or are your friends hiding somewhere?”

“I came alone. There will be rather a lot to do; there are things in Italy I’ll have to look after. But I’m not going to worry until I must. Joy suggested that I should come, to make sure you’d forgiven me, so I brought some flowers; I knew they’d give you a better message than I could.”

“They are beauties! I’ve been looking at the gorgeous ones in the shops in town,” Elspeth confessed. “We have only little cottage roses. These are duchesses or court beauties!”

Maidlin laughed. “Is it too late to ask you for a cup of tea? We’ve come a long way.”

“In two minutes,” Audrey promised. “I’ll take some out to the car too. You didn’t come quite alone, I suppose?”

“No, Frost drove the car. Joy would be nervous if I’d come alone. I can drive, but I don’t go out without Rosamund or Joy,” Maidlin explained. “Ros had a class this evening, so I came alone.”

“What sort of class does she go to?” Elspeth’s thoughts had been often with friendly Rosamund.

“Oh, I mean she had to teach a class! She teaches country-dancing to our Guides and to the Women’s Institute. She’s a jolly good teacher.”

“And how is little Rosemary Jane?” asked Audrey, spreading a green cloth under a green umbrella.

Elspeth quietly but firmly removed it and spread it under a yellow umbrella instead. “I’m sure Maidlin will like that better.”

“I like them all. It is so pretty! Rosemary Jane’s topping, a little angel. She’s three weeks old now.”

“And is that still her name? Or has it been changed again?” Elspeth filled a green bowl with water and began to arrange the roses.

“No, I think it’s really fixed that she’s Rosemary Jane.”

“And has Mrs. Raymond’s little boy begun with measles yet?” Audrey asked.

“Oh yes! He always copies Janice in everything. But he isn’t ill; he’s a lovely kid, and always very well. Joan can’t come near us till he’s better, because of Elizabeth and Margaret.”

“Are those the twins—Lady Marchwood’s twins?”

“Yes, Joy’s twins. Ros and I were her first children.” Maidlin sank into a basket chair under the yellow umbrella. “She adopted us when she was only twenty-one, seven years ago. I’ve often thought how brave she was! I was just a baby of fourteen, but Ros, at fifteen, wasn’t a baby at all. It was tremendously sporting of Joy. But she had Jenny-Wren to help her; she always says Jen pulled her through.”

Audrey brought a tray, with a green plate and cup and saucer. “I’m beginning to understand about Lady Marchwood and the twins and Rosamund. But who is Miss Jenny-Wren?”

Maidlin’s eyes widened. “She’s the mother of Rosemary Jane. She’s Lady Marchwood too.”

“No, no! That’s too muddling,” Audrey protested. “How does she manage it? She can’t be allowed to be another Lady Marchwood!”

“Rosamund told me. She married a brother.” Elspeth looked up from her roses.

“How trying of her! But—oh!” and Audrey’s face grew grave. “Have the twins no father?”

“He died before they were born,” Maidlin explained. “Joy was only married for one year. She never lived in his house at all. They went to London, and from there to Kenya for their honeymoon; and he never came home. Joy came back to her own house, and the twins were both girls, so Andrew’s brother became Sir Kenneth. As he’d married Jen, who was Joy’s best friend, that made Jen another Lady Marchwood.”

“It isn’t so puzzling when you understand how it happened,” Audrey admitted.

“Jen’s eldest boy is called Andrew after him. The second is Antony, after Sir Antony who left the Abbey to Joan. Then there’s Rosemary Jane.”

“A nice little family! And you all live close together?”

“Next door. Jen’s garden meets ours. Her house is the Manor and ours is the Hall.”

“And where is the Abbey?”

“In our garden. It’s beautiful. Couldn’t you come to see it?”

Audrey laughed. “The worst of our job is that we can’t take holidays. Other folks’ holidays are our busy times,” and she went indoors to make the tea.

As she worked, she saw Elspeth and Maidlin walking round the garden together.

“I’m glad she came. Elspeth will have something new to think about, and something pleasanter than blaming Eleanor. She’s always inclined to brood over any trouble. Oh, how glad I am the kid has decided to stay at home! I wouldn’t have asked her to do it, but it’s what I was hoping for. We’ll make a good thing of the Squirrel between us; I’ve heaps of plans. But Eleanor wasn’t keen, and she wouldn’t back me up. Elspeth has all the imagination that’s needed; if I can stir her up we can go ahead. I’m seeing visions and dreaming dreams!”

Elspeth, among the lupins and pansies, was shyly telling Maidlin of her new plans.

“It’s only been decided this afternoon. I shall ask Audrey to teach me cake-making; she had a proper course of lessons, but I shan’t need that, as I can learn from her. And I thought I’d take on the gardening; she hasn’t time for it. I don’t know whether she’ll keep on Alice, the girl who has been helping her, but if not, there’ll be washing-up all day as well. I’d far rather be in a kitchen or a garden than in an office.”

“Oh, so would I! Kitchens are fascinating. I used to live on a farm, before I came to live with Joy,” Maidlin explained. “I was brought up in a farm kitchen. My mother went away to be in service in London, and when she died——”

Elspeth was staring at her wide-eyed. “Your mother?”

“She was a housemaid,” Maidlin said composedly. “In a big house in London. My father saw her; he was staying in the house. He married her, and then he had to go back to Italy. I was born, and she died, and he left me with my aunts on the farm. His father in Italy was very angry, for there was a lot of money to come to him. But he died, and my grandfather died, and in a few years the money will be mine. I’m rather afraid of it; I wish I hadn’t been an heiress. But it was because of the money that Joy adopted me; she was so sorry for me, you see.”

“I *don’t* see!” Elspeth exclaimed. “Why was she sorry because you were an heiress?”

“I was staying with my other aunt, who is the caretaker of Joan’s Abbey. She couldn’t teach me the things I had to know, and the way I ought to live. Joy saw how awful it was for me, and she took me into her family,” Maidlin explained. “I didn’t understand at the time, but now I know all that it has meant and what a difference it has made. I suppose I’d have been sent to boarding-school if Joy hadn’t adopted me; but even school wouldn’t have been all I needed. It’s not like living with people. I’d still have looked at everything from the farmhouse point of view. You know what I mean?”

“Did Lady Marchwood take you into her own house?” Elspeth asked, intensely interested. “Weren’t you scared stiff?”

“Oh, I was terrified! And Ros was there, and I was afraid of her too, and dreadfully jealous. I couldn’t bear it if Joy spoke to her or took any notice of her. I was a little silly,” Maidlin sighed. “But it was all so new, and I was so frightened, and they all seemed so queer—Joy and Jen and Ros!—There’s your sister with my tea.”

“I’ll take some out to your man,” and Elspeth hurried forward. “Audrey, I’ve been slacking again! I spend all my time telling you I’m sorry!”

“Not this time. You’ve been entertaining our guest. You’ll find a tray ready for the chauffeur,” Audrey nodded.

Maidlin begged to be shown the woods when her meal was over. “And squirrels, if possible, please!”

“You go, Audrey. I’ll tidy things here,” Elspeth suggested.

“Nonsense! I’m sure you can produce more squirrels than I can. Run along, but don’t forget Miss Maidlin’s long drive home.”

“Oh, you mustn’t call me that!” Maidlin’s tone was shocked. “It’s so unfriendly. I shall think you don’t like me!”

Audrey laughed, and carried a tray indoors.

In a corner near the pond the two girls crouched to watch a red squirrel dart across the path and up a long bare stem. Then, as Maidlin would have risen, Elspeth caught her arm, and they held their breath as a vivid streak of blue flashed across the pool.

“What was it?” Maidlin whispered. “What a gorgeous colour!”

“The kingfisher. He lives over there. But he’s very shy; it was just a chance to see him.”

“A lucky chance for me. I’m so glad I came with you! It will be something to tell the girls to-morrow. We have meetings in our beech woods,” Maidlin explained. “We sit round a camp fire and sing and tell stories. Sometimes we all report some beautiful thing we’ve seen. I shall tell about the kingfisher and the squirrel.” And as she walked with Elspeth down the wood paths she told of her Camp Fire Girls and of her duties as Guardian.

“Why aren’t the squirrels shy?” she asked. “Don’t you have picnic parties in the woods? I should have thought they’d have driven all the squirrels and kingfishers away.”

“Oh, but this part is private,” Elspeth explained. “The open parts of the woods are across the road. People picnic there all the time. Behind us the land belongs to the big house at the foot of the hill, and it has been shut up for years. So the birds and squirrels use it as a sort of sanctuary, we think. We’re allowed to wander there, but not many other people go. That’s why we love it so.”

“Elspeth’s a solitary being,” Audrey said laughing. “She loves to be alone. Crowds don’t attract her in the slightest.”

“I know how she feels,” Maidlin agreed. “But we couldn’t live like that,” and she looked at Elspeth. “It would be dreadful if we all lived on our own.”

“I know. It’s horrible to want to go off and enjoy yourself all alone by a pool in the woods,” Elspeth agreed. “It’s unsociable, and it’s no good to anybody. But it’s how I’m made. What do you think I ought to do about it?” Her answering look at Maidlin was not entirely in joke; there was seriousness behind.

“I think there are different sorts of people and we’re all needed,” Maidlin said promptly. “There are plenty who prefer to be in a crowd. Perhaps the woods will teach you something useful to do that you couldn’t learn with packs of people about.”

Elspeth coloured. “Perhaps, some day,” she admitted.

“You can’t tell me, of course. But perhaps you’re going to be an artist, or a poet, or a novelist, and you have to go away and think by yourself. I live with somebody who writes books, and I know what she’s like at times.”

“Lady Marchwood? Does she write?” Audrey asked with interest.

“Not books. Joy writes lovely songs. No, I mean Mary Dorothy Devine, who writes books for girls.”

“But she doesn’t live with you, does she?” Elspeth asked, in amazement. “I’ve some of her books, and I love them.”

“She’s one of our family. She’s Joy’s secretary, when she isn’t writing books. She goes into the woods alone. Perhaps you’re going to write books, too,” and Maidlin looked at Elspeth again.

“You are queer people! How many more are there in your family?” Elspeth cried.

“We’re always adopting somebody,” Maidlin said sedately. “Joy and Jenny-Wren will do it; it’s their way. Now I really must go. Thank you so much for the tea and the kingfisher!”

CHAPTER FIVE

A SHOCK FOR ROSAMUND

"I'm glad I went!" Maidlin settled down in a corner of the big saloon car. "They're nice girls. If I hadn't gone Elspeth would always have thought of me as the person who'd been unkind. Even if she'd forgotten, I should have remembered her as the girl I was unkind to. Now I can forget and I'm sure she will."

She could not call on Joan, because of the measles infection. So the chauffeur turned westwards, and Maidlin lapsed into a dream of her Camp Fire.

As the car drew up before the door of the Hall, Joy came running out. "Maidie, have you seen anything of Ros?"

The widowed Lady Marchwood was the double of her cousin, Joan Raymond, with the same bright bronze hair, unshingled, and the same brown eyes. Her gray dress set off her vivid colouring and suited her. At the moment her eyes were anxious.

"Ros?" Maidlin looked alarmed. "Joy, how could I? I've been away down in Sussex. Hasn't Ros come back from the village?"

"She didn't go to the village. She's out wandering on the hills, and it's nearly dark," Joy's voice and face were worried.

"But why? What's happened, Joy? Is anything the matter with her? Didn't she take the class at the Institute?"

"We'll go and talk to Jen," Joy dismissed the car. "Leave your coat, Maid, and come along. Ros is in trouble. I'll tell you as we go."

Maidlin ran indoors, looking frightened. She came out without her hat and big coat.

"Tell me, Joy! What's wrong?"

"There was a letter," Joy spoke quickly, as they crossed the lawn towards the shrubby path. "A letter for Ros by the evening post, from Ceylon. I saw her father's writing. She read it just as she was going to start for the village. I heard her cry: 'Father! How could you? Oh, how awful! Mother!'—and then she rushed away into the Abbey."

Maidlin's lips were trembling. "Ros always goes to the Abbey when anything's wrong. Didn't she tell you anything, Joy?"

"I didn't really see her. She was on the terrace, and I was at the nursery window. I heard her cry out and saw her run off, but I couldn't speak to her."

"And did she forget the class? It must be something awfully serious!"

"She didn't forget," said Joy. "In a few minutes your Aunt Ann came from the Abbey. Ros had asked her to tell me she had gone out on the hills, as she had to think over some news she had just received, and would I please send Mary to take the class. I went to Mary-Dorothy, and she was as worried as I was. She was working at those proofs that are bothering her so much, so I said I'd go down and teach instead. I've been teaching 'Geud Man,' with my mind full of Ros, wondering what her father could have said to upset her so much."

"He can't be dead," Maidlin argued, as they hurried down the path between walls of rhododendron. "You said the letter was from him."

"And Ros said: 'Father! How could you?' There's only one thing," Joy said grimly. "He's married again, or he's going to marry again."

Maidlin stared at her. "Joy! Do you think so? Why, Joy?"

“There’s only one thing that would make a man’s grown-up daughter speak like that. Ros said,—‘Oh, how awful! Mother!’ I’m afraid it’s that,” Joy said.

“Ros with a stepmother! Joy, she’ll hate it. Will she have to go and live with them?” and Maidlin stopped short in dismay. “Oh, Joy, they won’t take her away from us?”

Joy laughed. “Ros is twenty-two. Nobody can take her away unless she wants to go or feels she ought to go. They won’t want her, Maid. What newly-married couple would want a girl of twenty-two? Her father has never wanted her; even if the new mother is nice she’ll prefer to have her husband to herself. I hope Ros will feel she belongs here now. It’s been her home for seven years.”

“Oh, I hope she will!” Maidlin cried. “Oh, if it means that I’ll wish he’d been married sooner! Ros has always said that some day she’d have to go to look after him. But now—!”

“Yes, perhaps now she’ll settle down,” Joy agreed. “But we don’t know yet that it is that, Maidie.”

“If Ros knows she hasn’t any other home, she’ll have to stay here,” Maidlin disposed of Rosamund’s future easily. “We’ll ask Jenny-Wren if she thinks we’re right.”

“Ros will feel it badly at first,” said Joy. “But I don’t see why she should care once the shock is over. She only saw her father for a short while in Switzerland at the time of her mother’s illness, and he has written to her very seldom in the last three years. She can’t pretend to care deeply about him.”

“But you said she was upset, Joy?”

“It was a shock, of course. And she’ll feel it for her mother’s sake. No girl likes to feel her mother’s place has been filled. Come and tell Jenny-Wren!”

The younger Lady Marchwood lay in a long chair among the rose bushes just outside the house, wrapped in a blue cloak and enjoying the sunset glow. Twenty-five, with bobbed yellow curls and blue eyes, she did not look like the mother of Andrew and Tony and Rosemary Jane.

“You dear people, how nice of you to come!” she cried. “Maid, tell me all about the Squirrel House! It’s too bad of you to discover it just when they won’t let me go for anything but the shortest little drives. Might as well be in a perambulator! I’m going for a proper run next week, if I have to dodge Nurse and the doctor. Joy, if you want Rosemary Jane you’ll have to go upstairs. Nurse said it was too late for a lady of her tender years to be out. Did you see the sunset? And look at that beautiful green glow!”

Joy sat on the edge of her chair and Maidlin on a stool by her side.

“Green glows are all very well, Brownie,” Joy used the old school nickname of May Queen days. “But we’ve come to talk over something serious. It won’t worry you, will it? You’re quite fit, aren’t you?”

“I’m as fit as fiddles, and ready for anything,” Jen spoke soberly. “What’s the row, Joy? I haven’t heard or thought anything serious since the babe was born. Ken’s like an infant when he has a new baby, and especially this time because she’s a girl. He’s quite off his head. Well, he really is awfully bucked, and I can’t drag a sensible word out of him. Every single thing he says is a joke. I’m ready to tackle any problem. I know it isn’t the twins, for you’re only worried. If one of them had fallen into the lake you’d be distraught.”

“Jenny-Wren, don’t be absurd! Would you be distraught if Tony had fallen into the lake?”

“I’d be in the lake too. That’s enough of nonsense! I’m teeming with advice. What’s the trouble?”

“Ros is upset by a letter from her father,” and Joy told what she had seen and heard. She waited, without comment but with her eyes fixed on Jen.

“H’m! And you don’t know what’s happened? It sounds to me like a stepmother.”

“Just what Joy said!” Maidlin cried. “I’d never have thought of it. Jen, what will Ros do?”

“That’s the question. We’ll have to wait—here she comes!”

Rosamund came across the lawn from the gate that led by a footpath to the hills.

“She’s fagged,” Jen said. “Fetch a chair, Maidie! In the sun parlour—a comfy one, with cushions. That’s right!—Ros, my dear, how nice of you to come!”

Rosamund dropped into the chair. “I saw Joy and Maid cross the lane, so I thought I’d tell you all at once. I was sorry to shunt the class on to Mary, Joy, but I couldn’t have taught even ‘Ruffy Tufty’ to-night.”

“I took the class,” said Joy. “Mary was at her proofs. But I was thinking so much about you that I messed up the dances.”

“Sporting of you!” Rosamund exclaimed. “You saw I was upset, then?”

“I guessed there was something wrong. Tell us, Ros!”

“Father’s married,” Rosamund’s lips pinched. “I didn’t know he was thinking of it.”

“Oh, Rosie! We were afraid it was that. My dear, what a shock for you!”

Maidlin said nothing, but her eyes never left Rosamund’s face.

“You’d had no warning, Ros?” Jen asked, her tone full of sympathy.

“Not a word. I was dazed. I had to think it over, Joy.”

“Yes, of course. You’ll need time to get used to the idea,” Joy agreed.

“I can’t take it in. It seems awful to me. It’s only three years since Mother went.”

“It isn’t awful. It’s very usual,” Jen said practically. “Don’t be too hard on him, Ros! He was lonely and he wanted company, and you were a very long way off.”

“I’d have gone if he’d wanted me, and I’d have done my best to make up for Mother. You know I offered, and he said I’d better not come out. I know it’s nothing unusual, Jen, but I never expected it to happen to me.”

“That’s just the shock and the surprise,” Jen remarked. “In a week you’ll be thinking about it quite calmly. I’m not being unfeeling, Rosamunda; I’m desperately sorry about it. But it’s done, so let’s make the best of it.”

“It’s on Mother’s account that I mind. He’s never cared about me. He may have liked me when I was a small kid, but he’s forgotten that long ago. But he had Mother until three years ago. They were married for thirty years,” Rosamund said unsteadily. “How can he have forgotten?”

“It doesn’t follow that he has forgotten,” Jen pointed out. “Be fair, Ros! She made him so happy that he can’t live without a companion. Isn’t that possible?”

Rosamund gave an indignant exclamation. “He’s fifty-nine. And he’s married a beautiful girl; a *girl*! It’s hateful!”

“Oh!” Joy and Jen looked at one another.

“He says she’s about my age. How would any of you like to have a beautiful young stepmother no older than yourself?”

“I’d loathe it,” said Maidlin.

“Ros, that’s very trying,” Jen said sympathetically. “If she had been a nice sensible middle-aged person it wouldn’t have seemed so bad.”

“But a girl!” Joy added. “Yes, Rosie, it is horrid. But, my dear kid, need it make much difference? You won’t want to live with them?”

“Rather not! What do you take me for?”

“Of course Ros won’t live with them!” Jen exclaimed.

“No, but it changes everything,” Rosamund’s tone was sharp, for she anticipated opposition. “Don’t you see how it changes everything for me?”

She looked at Joy, and then turned wistfully to Jen, avoiding Maidlin’s anxious face.

“Jenny-Wren, don’t *you* see that everything is changed for me now?”

“I see that you’ve thought it all out,” said Jen. “Tell us, Ros! What do you mean by everything being changed for you?”

Through the trees and across the lawn came Mary Devine, Joy’s secretary and the friend of all the family. “Am I interrupting? We wondered what had become of Joy and Maidlin, for we knew the car had come back.”

“I’m sorry, Mary-Dorothy. We ought to have told you we were coming to consult Jenny-Wren,” said Joy, and made room for her on the chair beside Jen and herself.

“Come and help, old thing!” Jen exclaimed. “Ros has been telling us her news.”

Mary, short and slight, with dark hair touched with gray, and dressed in brown, looked at Joy.

Joy nodded. “It’s what we guessed. Ros has a new mother——”

“A beautiful young step,” Rosamund said gloomily. “How would you like that, Mary-Dorothy?”

“Is she young?” Mary asked. “It will have been a blow to her to hear about you, Ros.”

“My hat, yes! I hadn’t thought of that. Think of being suddenly presented with a daughter the size of me!”

“I’d rather have a daughter the size of Rosemary Jane,” Jen admitted. “Mary-Dorothy, Ros says it changes everything for her. She’s just going to tell us what she means.”

And all four looked anxiously at Rosamund.

CHAPTER SIX

THE STEP-DAUGHTER'S PLANS

"Need it change anything, Ros?" Joy asked wistfully. "Won't it just mean that you'll stay here with us? He won't need you now; and we want you. This will be your home, that's all."

Rosamund looked at her; then she looked at Maidlin's anxious face, and then at Jen.

Jen, nearer her age than Joy, understood. "I don't think Ros can do that, Joy," she said gently.

She was three years older than Rosamund, while Joy was six. There had always been close sympathy between them, and Rosamund was as much an adopted aunt to Jen's children as she was to Joy's twin girls.

"Tell us, Ros!" Joy pleaded anxiously. "Why can't you stay? You've liked being here, haven't you?"

"Joy dear, what a silly question!" Jen scolded gently. "We all know how Ros feels about this place. Didn't she come bolting back like a rabbit to its burrow, when she lost her mother? Just as I did? We're all the same; it's home. But Ros isn't going to snuggle down in a comfy hole for the rest of her life. She wants adventures. Tell us, Rosie!"

"I've been waiting," Rosamund said stormily. "Mother told me to take care of Father. He wouldn't have me out there, so I've been waiting till he came home. I was going to do my best, for Mother's sake, though I think you know I wasn't very keen about it. But I thought it would be all right when I knew him better. That last time he came home, when she was so ill, hardly counted; we were so worried, and we thought only about her. I've been hoping things would be quite jolly when we settled down together. Now all that's over. He's put somebody else in her place, and I'd be horribly in the way. They won't want me, and I don't want a beautiful young stepmother. It's a hateful idea." She paused for breath.

Joy said quickly, "But we want you, Rosamunda."

"I know," Rosamund's face softened. "You're angels. But I've been dumped on you for seven years. It can't go on indefinitely. Oh, I know you'd be willing! But I can't go on with nothing before me. Don't you *see*, Joy? I was marking time, till Father needed me. Now he'll never need me. It's not exactly a question of money and earning my living. Mother left me a little, and with my allowance from Father I daresay I could pull through. But it is a question of doing something to earn my right to be alive."

They all looked at her quickly.

"How do you mean, Ros?" asked Mary Devine.

"It's obvious," Rosamund retorted. "Look at the five of us! Joy is bringing up Elizabeth and Margaret, and attending to her property, and doing a thousand good things with her money, and writing songs. Jen's bringing up a whole family of kids and running the Manor, and taking care of Kenneth, and doing all sorts of social stunts that are expected of her. She opens bazaars beautifully——"

Jen groaned. "The plague of my life! I'm glad I do it nicely!"

"You're a topping Lady of the Manor. Mary turns out at least one first-class book every year, as well as doing all the worst of Joy's business for her. Maid's voice and her music take all her time, and soon she'll come into her money, and she'll have estates to manage too. What about me? What use am I?"

“You help us all,” Joy said quickly. “Look at the country-dance classes you teach in the village!”

“I’m not going to teach country-dancing all my life!”

“You might do worse,” Jen observed. “It does a tremendous amount of good. We’ve all seen cases of people whose lives were changed by a country-dance class. It brings shy people out of themselves and sets them off on a new life.”

“It’s all right for those who are satisfied with that to go on teaching it,” Rosamund conceded. “I’m not. I want to do something real.”

“You’ve been talking to Mary-Dorothy,” Jen remarked. “But I won’t tease you to spend your life teaching country-dancing. There are bigger things! What are you going to do?”

“That’s the question,” Rosamund said grimly.

“And you’ve found the answer,” Jen looked at her keenly.

“Not exactly. I’ve thought till I’m tired. I felt I shouldn’t go any farther if I went on thinking; as if I must leave it all till something more happened.”

“I know,” said Mary, from her own experience. “You can’t think beyond a certain point, at times. You have to go so far, and then wait for the next step to come.”

“That’s how she writes her books,” Joy observed. “She always says they ‘come’.”

“They wouldn’t, unless I did hard work first, in the way of thinking,” Mary retorted. “How far did you go, Ros?”

They all looked at her, with a shock of realisation that they knew so little of the real Rosamund. What would she choose to do with her life? Something energetic, perhaps adventurous; more, they did not know.

Yet she had lived with them, one of their circle, for years. Till this moment they had not dreamed they did not know her. First as a schoolgirl and then as a friend she had fitted into her place in their homelife, always busy and full of energy. She had taught the village folk-dance classes, taking them off Joy’s hands. She had learnt to use Mary’s typewriter, and had made Mary teach her shorthand. She had learned weaving in the village Institute, and, though not an enrolled Guide, had given much help to the local Company. Whatever had been going on, Rosamund had been in it; and in between there had been the children, Jen’s boys at the Manor, Joy’s girls at the Hall, to whom she and Maidlin were unofficial but very efficient aunts.

But in spite of it all, and of Rosamund’s constant stream of chatter, not one of her friends could forecast her choice now that the opportunity had come. Jen realised, as Joy did not, that Rosamund would want to go; that with no future drawing rapidly nearer, the village life would seem indefinite and unsatisfying. But what Rosamund would choose to do, and on what lines she would try to build her life, even Jen had no idea, to her own surprised dismay. It argued a very deep reserve in Rosamund, which they had not even suspected. Jen looked at her with new eyes.

Rosamund looked back at them all steadily.

“I was ready to do what I felt I ought to do. I was prepared to pour out Father’s tea and darn his socks. I wasn’t looking forward to it, but I was going to do it, and I’d made up my mind to like doing it. Now I’m not asked to do it. I can’t see that there’s any definite duty in front of me. That being so, I may surely ask myself what I’d like to do; what, most of all, I want to do.”

Joy nodded. “I’m sure you may, Rosie.”

Jen looked deeply interested.

Mary Devine said quietly, "If there's a thing you want to do, very, very much, a wish coming from the deepest place in your heart, that's the thing you *ought* to do, Ros. You're fortunate in having the chance to follow your deepest desire. So many people have to be content with duties that are forced on them."

"That's what I feel," Rosamund said eagerly. "I've been asking myself what I really want. It isn't easy to find out—to dig deeply enough; I hadn't even asked myself what I'd do if I could choose."

"You want time," Jen said quickly. "We ought not to ask you yet. It isn't fair. You should take a week to it, Ros."

"Oh, I haven't fixed the details or anything definite! The thing I want most of all is what most people want, I suppose. I want to do something worth while; to be, or to do, something that counts. If I were Mary and could write books, I'd be satisfied. Or if I had Maid's voice, I wouldn't ask anything better than to use it. If I had a home and children, as you two have, I'd feel I was filling my place and being worth while. But having none of these things, and no particular gifts, I have to look round and find my work. It may be conceit," she said grimly, "and if it is I'm sorry; but I do want to be Somebody, Somebody who matters! There! Does it sound too awful? Or is it just ambition? I don't mean it in any horrid way. I don't even mean that I want to be famous; I know I never shall be. But I want to find a way to make myself of importance to somebody. I don't matter to Father any more."

"You matter to us," Joy said quickly. "If you go away you'll leave us very lonely, Rose-of-the-World."

Rosamund's face softened. "Thanks, Joy I believe that's true. But you've known I'd have to go some day. I feel it's time I began to pay my way," she said vehemently.

"How do you mean?" Joy asked doubtfully.

Jen nodded. "You want to work your passage. You can't go on being a saloon passenger for ever. You want to drive the car."

"I've had a good time, thanks very largely to you dear folk. I want to pay it all back, and not to you, for you don't need anything I can do. You like to have me here, but that's just a little extra pleasantness. I'm doing nothing for you that other people couldn't do just as well. I want to find some one who needs me and who hasn't any one else; or to do something nobody else is doing. It's vague, I know. But I haven't had very long yet."

"But how will you set about it?" asked Joy, interested but puzzled.

"I don't quite agree with you, Rosie," Jen remarked. "No one can fill your place here. You are doing a definite thing, and giving us real help by being here. But I do sympathise with your craving for a new start. If I hadn't been able to marry Ken when I lost Mother, I'd have felt as you do. I couldn't have settled down here with Joy, having a good time and just living from day to day. I'd have been restless in a month."

"Because you'd have had no future to look forward to," said Mary Devine. "That's the trouble. So long as it's only what Ros calls 'marking time,' one can be content. But it mustn't be for one's whole life. Rosamund is right. She must build up her future."

"Is there anything you'd like to do better than anything else, Ros?" Joy asked wistfully.

Rosamund's eyes sparkled. Her earnestness vanished, and she was the Rosamund they knew best, still half schoolgirl and ready for any mischief. She looked across at silent troubled Maidlin, and laughed.

"Maid knows! I suppose it's hopeless, but to be honest, I'm dying to keep a shop."

"Ros, how absurd!" cried Joy.

“I know. I knew you’d say that. But you asked me.”

“She’s often told me about her shop, in bed at night,” said Maidlin. “It would be rather fun, Joy!”

“But how would that satisfy your big ideas, Rosie?” Jen asked laughing.

“And what sort of shop?” asked Mary. “Books?”

“I’d stock yours first of all! You’d blush when you passed my windows. But it wouldn’t be books. I’m not sure what sort of shop. But it would be fun!”

“You can’t keep books in cardboard boxes,” Maidlin remarked.

Joy and Jen and Mary looked at her. “Cardboard boxes?”

Rosamund laughed. “She isn’t lightheaded. That’s what I want the shop for; to keep things in cardboard boxes. Don’t you call it stock? I’d love to have piles of boxes, all sizes, and pack things in each.”

“Ros, you babe!” cried Jen laughing.

“It sounds muddling to me,” Joy observed.

“Oh, but you don’t know! When I take your folk-dance and Guide notices to the printer’s, I can hardly keep my hands off the cardboard boxes in the office. All stacked up on shelves,—mysterious things in them—all clean and neat; my fingers just itch to play with them! I love cardboard boxes!”

“It will have to be haberdashery,” Jen said sadly. “A village store, with reels of cotton and skeins of silk and cards of mending wool, and ribbons, and lace, and trimmings, and fancy odds and ends, and perhaps gloves.”

“I’d love it! And hats,” Rosamund added. “I’d have ‘Rosamund’s Shop’ painted over the door, and a hand-done sign hung out.”

“You’d spell it ‘Rosamund’s Shoppe,’ I suppose,” Jen mocked.

“No, I loathe that sort of silliness. A shop’s a shop, not a shoppo. But I’d have a big rose painted on the sign. Will you come to my shop, Joy?”

“Oh, don’t be a baby!” Joy cried. “Perhaps you’d like to start in the village here? Or were you thinking of Regent Street?”

“Bond Street would do,” Rosamund said modestly.

“But is that going to satisfy you, Ros?” Mary asked.

Rosamund looked at her, wide-eyed and eager. “Mary-Dorothy, you sound as if you thought I might have my shop!”

“I think you’ll have what you’ve set your heart on. But won’t you grow tired of it? Is it big enough?”

“Not just a shop, for its own sake,” Rosamund admitted. “But I have wondered if there couldn’t be some sort of shop that would be useful to people. If I could get in touch with shy, quiet unknown folk, who make things and would like to sell them but don’t know how, and if I could sell their stuff and be a kind of centre, or depot, it might be really useful to quite a lot of people, Mary-Dorothy!”

Unconsciously an eager note had crept into her voice, and she was in earnest again, the mischief gone.

Jen, looking at her, knew that at last she had spoken out her deepest desire, not very clearly visioned even to herself until that moment.

“That’s rather nice,” Mary exclaimed. “I believe you could make something out of that. I knew a girl at our office when I lived in town, who made beautiful knitted lace in her spare moments; you never saw her without needles and a ball of thread or silk. She’d have given

anything to be able to sell it well. She sold a little to the other girls, but not nearly as much as she'd have liked to dispose of."

"That's the sort of thing I mean!" Rosamund cried. "My shop would be the depot for people like that."

"What rubbish you talk, Ros!" Joy said indignantly. "You aren't going to keep a shop!"

"My cardboard boxes!" Rosamund mourned.

"You were putting away the hand-made lace in one of them already, weren't you, Ros?" Mary sympathised.

"With weird little secret marks on the end of each, that no one else would understand! Joy, don't you feel fascinated? I'll let you come and play with my boxes!" Rosamund coaxed.

"You'll have a lot of dusting to do," Jen observed.

"I shall love dusting, if it's cardboard boxes!"

"We'll give you boxes to play with at home," Joy said brutally. "You can have an empty attic, with shelves, and you can play shop with Maidie."

Rosamund looked at her. "I'll say no more about it, then."

Jen leaned forward. "Ros, Joy didn't mean to hurt you. She hadn't quite grasped that you were in earnest. It's a startling idea; you've taken us by surprise. Give us an hour to grow used to it! I believe there's something in your plan, and I shan't be surprised if you have your cardboard boxes. If you really mean to stick to it I'll help you all I can. But don't look as if Joy had burst your toy balloon, for she hasn't. She's as much interested in your ideas as any of us; but the shop and the boxes were a shock to her."

"I'm sorry," Joy apologised. "Rosie, I spoke without thinking. You know I always do. Don't be wild with me, kid."

"You never will grow up, my child," Jen said maternally.

"I! Grow up!" Joy thought of all she had been through, in the loss of her husband ten months after her marriage. "What do you call being grown up, if I'm not?"

"Seeing the other person's point of view," Jen retorted. "Keeping back a sharp saying, and not trying to be funny, if it's going to hurt some one. Knowing when people are in earnest and likely to be hurt. That's what I call being grown up."

"You were born old, in that case," Rosamund remarked. "Don't scold Joy, or I'll hate you, Jen. She didn't upset me, except for a second. I'm going to tell her more about my shop. She hasn't had time yet to see what a topping idea it is. Maid, you and I will tell her as we go through the garden. I'm dead tired. Hadn't we better go home?"

The group broke up into its natural parts. Joy went gravely homeward, listening to the excited explanations of her adopted daughters, as Rosamund and Maidlin had been since their school days. Jen and Mary Devine, with a meaning look at one another, waited till they had gone, and then sat talking together of Rosamund's news and of her plans for the future.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEAUTIFUL GIRL

"I must go in and see to Rosemary Jane's supper," Jen said presently. "Tell Ros to come for a good talk to-morrow, Mary-Dorothy. When she's slept on the new situation she'll feel more able to think about it clearly."

"She's thinking fairly clearly already. Her father had never made her care deeply about him. The shock of the news will soon wear off," Mary remarked.

"Yes, but it has unsettled her. She's right, of course; she can't go on indefinitely here."

"Here she comes—and Maidie. They've come to fetch me; or perhaps Ros has something more to tell. Joy has gone on alone," and Mary rose, as Rosamund and Maidlin came out of the twilight, where the shrubby path to the Hall was almost dark.

"I forgot to tell you something," and Rosamund stood looking down at Jen, who waited curiously. "It needn't really make much difference, unless I choose. But if I want them I can have a whole new family. The B.G. has two sisters, and they're not in Ceylon, but somewhere in England."

"The B.G.?" Jen and Mary stared at her and asked a breathless question together.

"The Beautiful Girl; my beautiful young step," Rosamund said impatiently. "That's the only thing I know about her, silly!" as Jen gave a shout of laughter. "She's a beautiful girl, and she's married to Father, who is sixty next birthday. They'd been married for a week before he even told me about it, by the way. I never realised she might have a family behind her."

"She wasn't likely to be quite alone in the world," Jen remarked. "Is the new family just two sisters? That's not too bad; there might have been a dozen!"

"But they won't be related to you, Ros," said Mary. "It's a very slight connection by marriage, that's all. Where do they live?"

"Father doesn't say. I can't do anything till I hear more, so I've time to decide whether I want two new aunts or not. I wouldn't mind calling on them, since our relations have chosen to join us up, but I won't be bossed by new people just because their beautiful young sister has fascinated my silly Father. Well, I can't help it; that's how I feel. I don't sympathise with him a scrap."

"I don't think the step-aunts will try to boss you once they've seen you, Rosamunda," said Jen. "They are much more likely to be terrified of such a very bossy young step-niece. They may be charming. Their sister evidently is!"

Rosamund grunted. "Father calls her Nell."

"And is that something very black against her?"

"I wonder what her sisters think about her?" Maidlin suggested. "Perhaps they aren't any better pleased than you are, Ros."

"Then we could relieve our feelings together. Yes, I'll have to see them," Rosamund agreed. "Why couldn't Father give me their address? How can I find out where they are?"

"You'll have to write to him, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, Ros. It's very annoying of him."

"That means weeks. I shall advertise—'Wanted, the two sisters of Nell, who married Geoffrey Kane in Colombo, in the month of May last. At present residing somewhere in England. On replying to this advertisement they will hear of something to their advantage.' *I'm* the something! Wouldn't I be a shock if they answered expecting to receive a fortune?"

“But won’t you hear from them?” Mary suggested. “I mean in the natural course of things and not through any advertisement? Won’t they write to you?”

“I don’t really see why they should,” Rosamund retorted. “The fact that their beautiful young sister has taken on a beautiful young step-daughter as old as herself doesn’t matter to them; it’s her business! I think I ought to hear from her.”

“You ought, of course,” Jen agreed. “But give her time, Rosie. It’s her honeymoon! No doubt she’s overjoyed and thrilled to hear about her beautiful step-daughter. She’ll write and say so soon.”

“I hope they’ll stay in Ceylon,” Rosamund said gloomily. “As for the rest of her family, I suppose they are sort of half-aunts to me. If they write, I’ll see if they sound nice. But I can’t do anything unless I hear from them.”

“Why was the B.G. in Ceylon, if her sisters live in England?” asked Jen. “Ros, you shouldn’t have called her that. It will stick to her for ever.”

“What do you expect me to call her?” Rosamund was still feeling sore. “‘Mrs. Kane’? Not likely! It was Mother’s name. ‘Nell’? Not much! ‘Step-mamma’? I shall call her Beautiful Girl.”

“Well, why was Beautiful Girl in Ceylon?” Jen’s tone was patient, though her lips quivered.

“She was staying with friends. Father doesn’t write often, but a fortnight ago I had a letter that was full of Miss Abbott. I suppose he was trying to prepare my mind.”

“And you didn’t guess?”

“Goodness, no! He referred to her as ‘a little guest of some friends of mine.’ I never suspected anything; that sort of thing never occurs to me. I thought she was some kid he’d taken a fancy to. And so she is,” Rosamund’s tone was full of disgust. “How was I to dream he’d go and marry her?”

“It must have been very hurried, surely?” Mary asked.

“Her friends wanted to come home. So he asked her to stay, and they were married at once. I don’t like a single thing I’ve heard about her so far, so I don’t see that I’m likely to care much about her sisters.”

“Abbott?” said Maidlin. “Where did I meet somebody called Abbott? I remember thinking they ought to come and live in the Abbey. Oh, yes! Ros, the girls at the Squirrel House are called Abbott. Isn’t that odd?”

Rosamund looked at her. “Weird! Weird that we should meet two different Abbots at the same time. I shall go back to the Squirrel House some day, and ask Elspeth and Miss Audrey if they have any relations who go on visits to Ceylon and don’t come back. If Beautiful Girl turned out to be connected with those jolly girls, it would be the first good thing I’ve heard about her.”

“Poor Beautiful Girl! You are down on her, Ros!” Jen scolded.

“She might be a cousin of theirs, or something,” Rosamund went on wistfully. “I say, Maid, we’ll run over soon and find out! I’d love to be related to the Squirrel House! I could almost forgive Beautiful Girl if she gave me Elspeth for a cousin.”

“Wait a day or two, and then you can take me,” said Jen. “I want to see the Squirrel House, whether it’s connected with Beautiful Girl or not.”

“You may hear from Beautiful Girl in the meantime, Ros,” Maidlin suggested.

Mary laughed. “What would Mr. and Mrs. Kane say if they could hear you, Maid?”

“Beautiful Girl might say Beautiful Step-daughter was being sarcastic,” said Rosamund.
“Come and tell Joy my stepmother’s new name, Mary-Dorothy!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

LETTERS TO ROSIE

In the evening quiet of the wood behind the Squirrel House, Audrey and Elspeth talked over their plans, undisturbed by a hungry public wanting teas or ices.

"I thought, perhaps, we could begin keeping hens," Elspeth suggested. "I'd soon learn to look after them, and that would be a real help, Audrey."

Audrey laughed. "That's a sporting offer! But it's a full-time job, and I'd rather have your help in other ways. No, my dear, we won't branch out into a poultry farm. But I do want your help with the garden. It must look attractive, and I haven't time to do it properly. I shall hand over all that to you; the paths, and the beds, and the plants and the creepers. You'll keep the loggia clean and the fore-court neat and enticing. You'll like the job, won't you?"

"Rather! I'll love it. But you'll teach me to make cakes too? Suppose you went away and married another old man, and I didn't know how to make a sponge-cake!"

Audrey laughed. "That's a terrible possibility; we must prepare for such a catastrophe. You shall have lessons in cake-making, until you know as much as I do."

"That's what I want. In the afternoon we'll share the waiting and the work, and in between I'll do the garden. Couldn't we advertise 'Cut Flowers for Sale'?"

Audrey looked round. "What would you cut?"

"I'd have to grow something on purpose."

"You could do that," Audrey agreed. "Next year you shall do it. Rows of sweet peas in the orchard; you'll raise them from seed."

"I shall feel I'm really helping, if I do that!" Elspeth exclaimed.

Audrey's eyes wandered to the empty cottage which was the other half of the Squirrel House. "If we could some day take that place and make it all one house, it would be delightful. So many people stop here, and they wander about and look at things, and some of them have plenty of money. If there were more of us, we could run some sort of shop there, and make quite a good thing of it."

Elspeth looked at the cottage. "What a ripping idea! It's just the same as ours; we'd have twice as much room, if we could take it. We could have tables in there and give teas when it's wet. Then people wouldn't need to use our room."

"I'd thought of that, of course. It's a nuisance having to keep our room always ready in case of rain. But we can't afford two houses, Elspeth."

"Eleanor ought to give it to us as a present, to make up for leaving us in the lurch. She has let us down, Audrey! She ought to do something about it," Elspeth argued.

"We'll pull through without Mrs. Kane's help," Audrey retorted. "But we can't spread out into new houses just at present."

For the next day or two Elspeth looked at the garden and courtyard with new eyes, seeing improvements and work to be done.

"Could we afford some new roses, Audrey? There ought to be a Rambler on that arch—a white one," she said one evening.

Audrey laughed. "We'll see when the transplanting season comes. Make notes of all you think we ought to have, and we'll choose among them in the autumn."

“Window-boxes! Virginia stock edging the paths! Another clematis on the porch; and a passion-flower somewhere,” Elspeth murmured, and began to keep a note-book.

Two days after Maidlin’s visit, when her roses were overblown and magnificent, Elspeth met the postman at the gate, and then went racing in search of Audrey.

“Audrey! It’s from Eleanor; perhaps she tells us more about our new relation!”

Audrey was ironing yellow and green table-cloths, but she put the irons aside and came to read the letter.

Eleanor wrote from Madras and told of her honeymoon trip. Her last paragraph held the real interest of the letter.

“About Rosie, Audrey; could you write to her? Geoff always calls her Rosie; doesn’t it sound childish? He’s written to tell her about me, but there hasn’t been time yet to hear what she says. I ought to write too, but I don’t know what to say. My dear, she’s twenty-two; did I tell you before? Isn’t it awful? How can I write and say I’m glad to be her new mother? She’ll loathe the thought of me. But we must do something about her. Do write to her, Audrey, and say something nice about me! Tell her I’m quite decent, and really awfully fond of Geoff. And say I’ll write to her in a week or two, and I hope we’ll see her soon, if we come back to England. I don’t, but you’d better say it; it sounds the correct thing. Here’s her address; Geoff gave it to me.—‘Miss R. Kane, Abinger Hall, Whiteways, near Thame, Oxfordshire.’—‘Abinger Hall’ sounds rather terrifying, but he says it’s where her friends live. She’s been with them for years, ever since she was at school. I should think she’d better stay with them. Be a brick, Audrey, and write to her nicely for me!

“Love from Eleanor.”

Audrey laid down the letter. “Now we know what’s expected of us.”

“I don’t see why you should do all the things that Eleanor finds difficult or awkward,” Elspeth remonstrated.

“Neither do I. I don’t think I’d do it, if Eleanor’s feelings were the only ones in question. She’s behaving thoroughly badly, it seems to me. But for the credit of the family I shall write to ‘Rosie’. Some one must do it, and Eleanor evidently means to funk.”

“It’s horrid for Rosie. Fancy having a stepmother like Eleanor!”

“Yes, for her sake I must write at once. She’s heard from her father; she must be feeling very sore.”

“She won’t know about us,” Elspeth added. “She can’t write to us, can she? It’s up to us to do something.”

“Yes, if there’s to be any friendliness shown it must come from us. We must do the decent thing, and then see how she responds.”

“If she lives at Abinger Hall, she won’t be keen on new relations who keep a tea-house in the country,” Elspeth remarked.

“Probably she’ll be polite, but won’t want to see very much of us. That will suit us well enough. But we’ll do our share. You must help me to make up the letter.”

“I wish she wasn’t called Rosie! It sounds so soft.”

Audrey laughed. “That’s her father’s name for her. She may be Rose now that she’s grown-up.”

“I hope so! Shall you put ‘Dear Rosie’?”

“Certainly not! She’s Miss Kane, unless she chooses to be anything else.”

Between them the sisters composed the letter, sitting in the shelter of the loggia early next morning. Audrey wrote, while Elspeth prompted and made suggestions.

“Dear Miss Kane,

“We have heard of you as ‘Rosie’ from our sister Eleanor, whose marriage to your father was as much of a surprise to us as it must have been to you. Eleanor is very busy having her honeymoon and looking after your father, so she has asked us to write to you and make friends. We are her sisters, Audrey and Elspeth; Audrey is five years older than Eleanor and Elspeth five years younger. We are feeling a little lost and forsaken without our middle sister, who was a link between us——”

“Don’t say that!” Elspeth interjected. “It isn’t true. It gives her a wrong idea.”

“I meant in age,” Audrey explained.

“I know. But she’ll think you mean more. It was only in age that Eleanor linked us up. Really and truly we manage better without her. She wasn’t like either of us.”

Audrey sat gazing at the blue border of flowers. At last she drew her pen through the sentence.

“I’ll have to write it out again. This is only a first draft. Very well; I’ll leave that out. —‘Without our middle sister, and it would give us great pleasure to feel we had gained a new sister in her place.’ Is that better?”

“Topping! But I thought we were her aunts?”

“In fact, yes. But she’ll seem more like a sister. We won’t rub it in that her father has been so mistaken as to marry a girl as young as Eleanor.”

“Right-o! It’s nicer to call her a sister,” Elspeth agreed. “She’ll think we don’t know, but never mind.”

“I’m coming to that,” Audrey explained, and went on with the letter.

“It would give us great pleasure to feel we had gained a new sister in her place. As one of us is only seventeen, we feel you would prefer to be a sister rather than a niece! Our sister has left us to go into your family; we very cordially invite you to come into ours, so far as you care to do so. We hope to meet you very soon; perhaps you can suggest a meeting-place? We do not know how to find Abinger Hall, and we do not keep a car. But we do keep a tea-house, and it is not easy for us to be away for a day. Will you come to see us, if possible?”

“Yours very sincerely,

“AUDREY ABBOTT.

“ELSPETH ABBOTT.”

“She’s sure to be able to borrow a car,” Audrey remarked.

“I’m glad you told her about the Squirrel,” said Elspeth. “If she doesn’t like it she needn’t come.”

“It’s better to explain at once. I’ll copy out the letter.”

“I hope Rosie will answer!” Elspeth exclaimed, and began to weed the border.

Presently Audrey, writing at the cottage window, saw her throw down her gardening gloves and come running indoors. She raced up to her bedroom, and came clattering down

again, a writing-pad in her hand. She ran off into the wood behind the cottage, and Audrey saw a glimpse of her lilac pinafore and yellow head down near the stream.

“Some sudden inspiration! I hope she’ll let me see it. Is it a sketch of the cottage for Rosie?”

Elspeth came back in half an hour. There was shy colour in her face as she stood beside Audrey.

“When are you going to post that, Audy?”

“As soon as you’ve signed it. Have you thought of anything else we ought to say?”

“I thought I’d send Rosie a letter too. Don’t put it in if you think it’s silly. Only if it will please her,” and Elspeth, with flushed cheeks, laid her pad before Audrey. “That’s my letter.”

In one corner was a pen-and-ink sketch of a big rose; in another two little squirrels with very bushy tails. At the foot of the letter were trees in each corner of the sheet, and between them a sketch of a cottage, with a tea-table under a big umbrella.

Audrey’s lips twitched as she read the letter which filled the middle of the page.

“Dear Rosie,

“We’re two little squirrels who want to be friends;
Our sister’s been thoughtless, but we’ll make amends.
We live in a cottage and give people teas,
We’ll scramble you eggs just as oft as you please.
Our cottage is pretty, our garden is nice,
And if you’ll come quickly, we’ll give you an ice.
Our clients come often and stay quite a while;
They’re jolly well pleased, as we know by their smile.
So come to the Squirrel House; come soon, and stay!
We hope you will like us and won’t go away.

“ELSPETH.”

“Is it cheek?” Elspeth eyed Audrey anxiously. “Shall you send it?”

“If she’s the right kind she’ll like it very much,” Audrey said. “I’ll certainly send it. It’s just what is needed. My letter is so very ordinary and obvious; I felt it wasn’t quite enough, but I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t try to be funny to a stranger!”

“Mine isn’t trying to be funny; not exactly,” Elspeth protested.

“I didn’t mean that. Yours is just right. I always said you were going to be a poet, didn’t I?”

“It isn’t poetry,” Elspeth coloured. “It’s doggerel. But it rhymes; and it scans, Audrey.”

“It has just the right lilt,” Audrey assured her. “You needn’t apologise for it. And the drawings are delightful. If Rosie doesn’t like your letter, I shall think she’s very hard to please.”

“I changed the second line. At first I said—‘Your father’s forgotten, but we’ll make amends.’ But I thought I’d better scold Eleanor, not her father.”

“Yes, it’s much wiser. Sign the other letter, and then you might take it to the post.”

“And then we’ll wait on pins and needles for a letter from Rosie!” said Elspeth.

CHAPTER NINE

ROSAMUND'S AUNTS

Jen Marchwood lay in a hammock between two big trees, nursing Rosemary Jane. The trees stood on the edge of the lake, in the open park where the grounds of Marchwood Manor joined the gardens of the Hall. Almost beneath her swinging couch was a gravel beach, where a break came in the rushes and undergrowth edging the pond, and here her two small boys, Andrew and Tony, were paddling. Andrew was three and Tony two; both had yellow curly heads inherited from their mother, in whose arms the dark-haired baby looked like a changeling, as Rosamund had said.

Andrew and Tony were not responsible for all the shouting and chatter, however. They were domineered over by two small girls of four, wearing green smock frocks tucked into holland paddling drawers, so that they looked nearly as broad as they were long. Their arms and legs were bare and brown, their red mops of curls were uncovered.

At a louder outburst and a wail from Tony, Jen looked up. "Children, what—Margaret Marchwood, come here!"

The younger twin marched sturdily up to the hammock, an indignant green gnome with a red tousled head. Her sister squatted on the gravel and watched.

"Margaret, why did you slap Tony?" Jen demanded. "Tony, don't howl! She didn't hurt you, except in your feelings. You should be used to Margaret by now. Well, Margaret?"

"Don't like Marg'et," Andrew was listening, very red-faced.

"Tony hitted Andy," Margaret explained. "Tony wanted Andy's pail, so he hitted him. So I hitted Tony, 'cos he was bad."

"That's tellin' tales, Margaret Joan Marchwood," observed the other twin, from her seat on the gravel. "Muvver said you wasn't to."

"Weren't to tell tales," Jen corrected. "Margaret, you won't make matters any better by hitting Tony. Leave that to Andrew. He'll keep Tony in order."

"Don't like Tony. He's a baby boy," said Margaret. "Andy's my f'iend."

Jen smothered a laugh. "Since when? This is very sudden, Margaret! Does Andrew—er—return your affection?"

"Don't like Marg'et," said Andrew again. "Tony's all yight, Muvver. Tell her not to hit him."

"Not to interfere in family matters, in fact," Jen agreed. "Margaret, you'd better let the boys arrange their own affairs. I can't really see that it's any business of yours."

"Margaret always stands up for Andy," Elizabeth remarked. "Andy don't like it."

"Doesn't like it! Elizabeth Joy, your English is going down."

"Don't care," said Elizabeth. "Aunty Jen, if Margaret says it's bad for Tony to hit Andy, why don't she say it's bad for her to hit Tony?"

"Doesn't, Elizabeth! That's more than I can tell you, my child. Because she has an illogical mind. But I suspect it's much more likely to be temper. Margaret, there isn't any need for you to defend Andrew. He can stand up for himself. Kindly let the boys see to these little matters without your help."

"Here's the pail, Baby," Andrew's tone was friendly, but patronising, as he handed the bucket to Tony.

“Not Baby any longer,” Elizabeth pointed out shrilly. “She’s Baby now; that funny little brown girl.”

“I f’got,” Andrew admitted. “She’s so new. Is she asleep, Muvver?”

“She was, but I expect you’ve all wakened her with your yelling,” Jen scolded. “Well, you may have one peep, then,” as the boys crept up to the hammock.

“Funny baby. Me not baby now,” Tony stood on tiptoe.

“Isn’t she little?” Andrew peered at his sister. “Funny little girl, Muvver! Will she be like Lizbeth and Marg’et?”

“In some ways,” Jen agreed. “But she won’t have red hair, so perhaps she won’t have Margaret’s temper.—Oh, Ros! Why did you go so far? We’ve needed you to keep the peace!”

Rosamund came along the bank of the lake. “What’s up? I thought they were all happy enough, or I wouldn’t have gone for a stroll.”

“Margaret on the warpath, as usual. Where’s Maid?—Children, go on with your game, but don’t fight any more. You may have just a few minutes longer.”

“Maid’s waiting for the postman,” Rosamund threw her hat on the gravel and sat on the bank close to the hammock. Her eye caught a low branch on one of the trees, and she climbed up and sat swinging her legs over the water.

“What’s the hurry about the postman?” asked Jen, lying back and drawing the shawl round Rosemary Jane again. “Is she expecting anything as thrilling as you had the other day?”

“No, but I am,” Rosamund retorted. “I can’t help feeling I shall hear more soon, either from Father, or Beautiful Girl, or her people.”

Jen laughed. “If that poor girl isn’t something quite out of the ordinary, how disappointed we shall all be when we see her!”

“It’s Father’s fault. He was the first to say it.”

“He didn’t expect it to make quite such a deep impression on you, though. Did you write and send your love to Beautiful Girl?”

“I didn’t send love to anybody,” Rosamund’s face clouded. “I said I was sorry he’d done it, but I hoped he’d be happy, and I wouldn’t be a nuisance to them.”

“And did you ask Maid to wait for the letters?” Jen asked, meaning in her tone.

Rosamund looked down at her. “Of course not. I know you think I boss Maid, but I don’t. She’s so much upset at the thought that I might perhaps go away, that she watches for every post for fear there’ll be a letter that will decide my plans. Jen, you haven’t said it, but you’re thinking it would be just as well for Maid if I did go away, aren’t you?”

“She depends on you too much,” Jen agreed. “I don’t want you to go, Ros, and Joy can’t bear the thought of losing you, but Maidie is much more self-reliant when you aren’t here. You stand between her and the world.”

“Like Margaret standing up for Andrew, I suppose!”

“But Maidlin likes it. Andrew doesn’t.”

Rosamund swung her legs and meditated. “It’s awfully hard, Jen! I see ways I can help Maid, and she needs help. It’s impossible to lie low and say nothing and let her plunge herself into difficulties. She feels things so dreadfully; she worries when there’s no need at all. Look how upset she was because she’d been unkind to the little Squirrel! She couldn’t settle to anything till she’d been and made friends with her.”

“Poor Maidie!” Jen laughed. “She has too much conscience; or rather, it’s uncontrolled. I do believe it would be better for her to be without so much of you, Ros. But I don’t want you

to go, any more than they do. There's a dreadful blank when you go to stay in Switzerland. It's unthinkable that you should ever go permanently. We couldn't say good-bye to you."

Rosamund moved restlessly on her branch. "It's more than nice of you all. I feel it myself; I do belong to you. I'd like to feel it was home and I could come back some time. But I can't settle down here for life, with no more to do than there is at present. You see that, don't you, Jenny-Wren?"

"I do see it, and I think you're right. You've too much energy to be content to be nursemaid to our children and assistant to Joy," Jen agreed.

"I love looking after the kids! I love all of them, even Margaret when she's naughtiest," Rosamund burst out. "If you went away with Ken to Kenya for a year and I was left in charge of the nursery, I'd settle down like a lamb and take care of everybody."

"Like a dragon," Jen said laughing. "Thanks for the offer, old girl. If Ken wants me to go, I'll send for you. I do understand, Ros. You want to feel somebody is depending on you."

"I want to feel I'm of use. I want to do something worth while. And—perhaps it's horrid of me, but I do want to have a home of my own," Rosamund exclaimed. "I don't mean that I want to be married. I don't want any man cluttering up my world. But I want a world of my own, not just a corner in yours and Joy's, however much I love you."

Jen laughed. "Ros, what a kid you are! It's lovely to have a man care enough about you to want you to clutter up his world! But don't consider the man until you can't help it, my child. If the right one comes along you'll know, without any doubts, and you'll want him to barge into everything and stir up all your private ways."

"I can't believe it. It would be just a nuisance to have to make room for a man."

Jen laughed again. "But you want your world, where you'll be queen. You're wise, Ros. If it opens before you, you must reach out and grasp the sceptre and rule, without considering Maid or Joy or me, or anybody."

"I shall break my heart," Rosamund said wistfully.

"In the meantime you're unsettled and restless."

"I've had my world shattered, without a moment's warning," Rosamund retorted. "It centred round Father; not in feeling, for I hardly knew him; but as a matter of duty. Now there's nothing, just a blank. It's thrilling, and I love thrills. I'd like to have adventures; but I'm waiting for the adventures to begin.—There's Maid at the gate. And she has a letter for me! Do you suppose it's the adventure?"

Maidlin waved a letter and came running across the grass.

"Much more likely to be a bill or an advertisement," Jen teased.

Rosamund slid from her branch and stood waiting, colour in her cheeks. "You never know. It might be something—"

"One for you, Ros!" Maidlin handed her the letter.

"I don't know the writing," Rosamund glanced at the envelope. "It's neat, like a girl's."

She tore open the letter, and glanced over the first sheet.

"My *hat!*" she murmured, and dropped on the bank and read the paper carefully.

Jen and Maidlin watched her anxiously. "There are pictures on it," Maidlin whispered. "Like Camp Fire symbols. Ros hasn't any Camp Fire friends, Jen?"

Rosamund dropped the letter, bewilderment in her face. She opened a second sheet, glanced at it, and with a gasping sob of amazement read it hurriedly. Then she looked up, her eyes dazed.

"It can't be true! Jen—Maid—it's the Squirrel girls!"

“What about them, Ros? Why have they written to you?” cried Maidlin.

“Ros, you don’t mean”—Jen began.

Rosamund stared up at them, her face still full of stunned amazement. “My new relations—sisters—aunts! Beautiful Girl is their sister. Well, they say so. They say their sister has married my father in Ceylon.”

“Ros! Elspeth and Miss Audrey?” Maidlin gasped.

“The girls who keep the tea place?” Jen asked, bewildered. “Ros, how very strange!”

“We knew their name was Abbott, but we didn’t think—it seemed impossible”—Rosamund said incoherently. “Read the letter, Jen. Read it aloud to Maid. I may begin to believe it if you read it. Just now I think I’ve imagined it.”

Jen read out Audrey’s letter. Rosamund sat gazing at her and holding Elspeth’s poem.

“Well, that’s all right,” Jen exclaimed. “It seems to be true. It’s an extremely jolly letter; your Aunt Audrey sounds delightful, Ros. You’re in luck, my dear!”

“Will Elspeth be your aunt, too, Ros?” Maidlin asked incredulously.

Rosamund sprang up. “Jen, is it true? Can I believe it? Are the Squirrel girls really my new family?”

“You must believe it,” Jen assured her. “Your father, Geoffrey Kane, says he has married someone he calls Nell Abbott. This Audrey Abbott says her sister Eleanor has married Geoffrey Kane. What more proof do you want?”

“In Ceylon,” Maidlin added. “They all say it was in Ceylon.”

“There’s no doubt of it, Rosie,” said Jen.

“You’re glad, aren’t you, Ros? They are such jolly girls,” Maidlin pleaded.

“Glad? I said I’d forgive him if he’d made me related to those girls. I never dreamt they could be the new family itself. Of course I’m glad! The Squirrel girls my new aunts! I can’t take it in. What will Joan say?”

“They say they’d rather be your sisters,” Jen remarked.

Rosamund was walking excitedly up and down the grass.

“Isn’t it weird that we should have discovered them before we heard? We were related when we first met, but none of us dreamt of it. They’re jolly girls, Jen; I couldn’t have a nicer family. I must go and see them again!”

“What is the other letter, Ros?” Jen asked. “May we see it too?”

Rosamund broke into delighted laughter. “The dearest little letter! I read it first, and I couldn’t think what she meant. I’m going to love my Aunt Elspeth! Come and see, Maid! It’s the sort of thing your Camp Fire Girls send to you.”

She held the sheet before Jen, who read the lines aloud, while Maidlin leaned over her shoulder.

“Ros, how charming! What a delightful welcome!”

“Elspeth ought to be in the Camp Fire,” said Maidlin. “It’s lovely, Ros. ‘We’re two little squirrels who want to be friends’! Isn’t it nice of her?”

“I love the cottage and the tea-table and the squirrels,” Jen laughed. “Is your Aunt Elspeth an artist or a poet, Ros?”

“She’s only a kiddy so far. About seventeen, I think.”

“But she’ll be something some day,” Maidlin remarked. “She oughtn’t to be cleaning pans.”

“Perhaps I could do the pans, and she could write poems or paint pictures,” Rosamund suggested.

Maidlin looked at her with startled eyes. "But will you—you won't go and live with them, Ros?" Her voice had a note of terror. "I'll hate them if they take you away from us. Why should you, Ros?"

"Ros hasn't had time to make plans yet, Maid. Don't be silly!" Jen scolded. "As for your idea, Ros, I think Mary-Dorothy would say your Aunt Elspeth will write better poems if she does the washing-up as well. Mary believes very firmly in a mixture of work and interests."

"I know. But too much washing-up would mean no poems. Perhaps the Squirrel girls were depending on their sister, for help in the work. I'll have to go and see them, Jen." Rosamund spoke more soberly, coming down to practical realities.

"Of course. But you'll write first. Ros, they write as if you were a stranger," Jen looked through Audrey's letter again. "Don't they know they've met you?"

"Why should they? No, I don't think they understand. They may never have heard my name," Rosamund said, thinking hard. "They heard me called Rosamund, by Joan and Maid; but I'm sure nobody called me 'Miss Kane'! I remember Elspeth asked my name; she asked if I was called Marchwood too. I fancy I said I was 'just Rosamund'. And you see they call me 'Rosie'. They may not have heard I'm really Rosamund."

Jen looked at the letter again. "No, you're just Rosie to them. Does your father call you that?"

"Always. I was only a kid when they left me at home with my aunt, before I came here; and he always called me Rosie. They'll think it's short for Rose. There's no reason at all they should connect me with the rather talkative friend who came to meet Joan that evening. I wonder if they'll be pleased or upset when they hear that I'm Rosie, or rather that Rosie is Rosamund?"

"They'll be amused," said Jen.

"Elspeth will be pleased. You were nice to her, and she liked you," Maidlin's face clouded. "If she hadn't been so jolly when I went the second time, I'd say she'd be glad it's you and not me. But she was too nice; she didn't really think I'd been unkind. She thought you were a jolly good sort, Ros. She'll be glad." She spoke with an effort and her face was grave.

Jen glanced at her, guessing her trouble. Knowing Maidlin well, she saw difficulties ahead. She changed the subject, to give Maid's thoughts a new direction.

"What shall you do, Ros? Write and tell them you are you, so to speak? You must write at once; they'll be waiting for an answer."

Rosamund considered the matter. Then she broke into delighted laughter.

"I shall write and sign myself 'Rose Kane'. I shall be friendly and say we must meet and talk things over. I shall ask them to come to see me here, so that they can meet my friends. I'll say I'll send our car to fetch them, and they must find some one to look after the Squirrel House for the day, or else shut up shop. When they arrive in the car, Maid and Joan and I will meet them, and they'll have the shock of their lives. And we'll see whether it's a shock of joy or horror when they see me."

"Ros, how brutal!" Jen cried laughing. "Won't you give them any warning?"

"Not a word. I want to see whether Elspeth laughs or weeps, and whether Audrey swoons with dismay."

"You can't have Joan here, because of John's measles," said Maidlin.

"Bother John! But Joy will do. At first glance they won't see any difference. They'll think she's Joan."

"Won't they recognise the car?" asked Jen.

“I doubt it. But we’ll borrow yours. They won’t have an idea where they’re coming to.”

“They’ll think you might have come in the car to fetch them,” said Maidlin.

“They’ll know why I didn’t, once they arrive and see me! It *is* jolly hard on them—but jolly useful for me!—that Joy’s house is still called after Sir Antony Abinger, dear old man!” Rosamund exclaimed. “I always thought it was nice of Joy to keep the old name.”

“It has been Abinger Hall for generations,” said Jen. “Joy couldn’t call it ‘Marchwood Hall’ when Marchwood Manor was next door! And before she was married she’d lived there for seven years, calling it Abinger Hall. She couldn’t re-name her house just because she’d found a husband. But all the same, ‘Lady Marchwood of Abinger Hall’ is surprising, I’ll admit.”

“If there had been any Marchwood about the address, the Squirrel girls would have guessed,” Rosamund remarked. “But they’ve had no clue whatever. I expect there are as many villages called ‘Whiteways’ as there are Suttons and Coldharbours. There isn’t any reason for the Squirrels to connect Rosie Kane with me. We’ll invite Joan to supper at the Squirrel House and break the news to her there, Maid! But not till we’ve broken it to the Squirrels themselves. Fancy Beautiful Girl having such jolly sisters! They aren’t in the least like my idea of her.”

“Perhaps your idea is wrong, Rosamunda,” Jen suggested. “Are you going to call her Beautiful Girl when you talk to her sisters?”

“Rather not! They call her Eleanor. I do think it’s jolly of them to be so welcoming!”

“Shall I take Elizabeth and Margaret home, Jen?” Maidlin interrupted. “It’s twelve o’clock. Joy will be coming to look for them.”

Jen glanced at her. “It’s time, isn’t it? I’ll be glad if you will, Maid. Then Ros can help me with the boys. They never want to leave the lake.”

“Rosemary Jane is enough for you, just at present,” and Rosamund picked up Tony. “Come along, Andy! Catch Aunty Rose and Tony-boy!” and she pretended to run.

Andrew responded with a shout and trotted after her excitedly, and Jen laughed and followed, leaving the twins to Maidlin.

“Mother’s waiting, Twinnies,” said Maidlin.

The words acted as a charm. The small girls came at once, without protest.

“Must go and see Muvver,” said Elizabeth.

“Want to show Muvver vis,” Margaret held up a pebble which seemed to her particularly beautiful. “Look, Aunty Maid! All round an’ smooove!”

“We’ll give it to Mother, shall we?” Maidlin put sandals on each twin, for they had to cross a lane, and pulled off the holland drawers into which their frocks were bundled. Transformed into fairy-like green sprites they trotted off beside her, carrying their hats and spades.

Jen looked back from the entrance to her orchard, and paused before following her sons and Rosamund down the path. She gazed at Maidlin and the green twins, going soberly through the wicket-gate, and shook her head.

“Poor Maid! But it had to come. She couldn’t have Ros for ever. I hope she takes it sensibly. But how can she? You don’t expect Maid to be sensible and practical! It isn’t her way. I hope she won’t break her heart or be jealous of these girls. I see difficulties ahead,” and she went on to the Manor, as gravely as Maidlin, going to the Hall.

CHAPTER TEN

DEAD PANSIES

Joy Marchwood looked up from her letters and listened. "Here come the babes. I hear Margaret's voice."

She was sitting at a round table of black oak, low and ancient, with beautifully carved legs, in a corner near the empty hearth. The great hall of her old house was dark and cool, with long windows thrown open to the garden scents and breeze, giving glimpses of green and the pink and red of climbing roses. The sun poured in through the upper windows, which were filled with coats of arms, and threw coloured lights on the polished floor. On the panelled walls were paintings, two hundred and fifty years old, of her ancestors, ladies of the court of Restoration days. On tables and window-sills were bowls of roses and sweet peas.

Mary Devine sat in the corner of an ancient settle, a writing-pad on her knee.

"The house is full of tables," Joy had once complained, "but Mary-Dorothy goes on dumping herself anywhere, and insists on using a writing-board. And yet she writes a thousand words to my one, and always at express speed."

"I use my writing-table only when I have to correct proofs, and my desk only to keep my letters in," Mary had said placidly.

She laughed, as Joy spoke. "How do you know it's Margaret? I heard the voice of a twin, but at that distance I couldn't have said whose voice it was."

"My dear, it always is Margaret's voice," Joy said crushingly. "Margaret's always talking."

"Oh well!" Mary laughed. "Elizabeth might be taking her share for once."

Maidlin pushed open the big door, and Joy held out her arms. With a rush the green sprites were beside her, both talking at once, of Aunt Jen's baby, of Tony, of Andrew. Margaret showed her treasured pebble, and Joy thanked her with a kiss and promised to use it as a paper-weight.

"Muvver, I hitted Tony, 'cos he hitted Andy," Margaret's voice pealed out.

"And Aunt Jen weren't pleased," Elizabeth added. "Aunt Ros had a letter, Muvver; a nice letter. Pictures in it; she showed me."

"Who told you it was a nice letter, midget?" asked Maidlin.

"Aunt Ros looked like she were pleased. And ve pictures was nice. Any pictures in your letters, Muvver?"

"I'm afraid not. Mother's are very dull letters to-day. Here's Nelly, Twinnies; go and have your milk and biscuits and a nice rest."

"What was the letter?" Joy glanced at Maidlin when the children had gone with their nurse. "Were there photos in it?"

Maidlin stood by the table, fingering a yellow rose.

"No, drawings. Ros had a letter from her new mother's sisters. She'll want to tell you herself. They sound very nice people. She's glad about them.—These roses are nearly over; I'll fetch some fresh ones."

She took up the bowl and disappeared, and they saw her in the garden, with scissors and a basket.

Joy and Mary looked at one another.

"She's unhappy," Mary said. "We shall have trouble when Ros goes away."

“When! Do you think she’ll really go?”

“I’m sure she will. And we mustn’t try to stop her,” Mary said gravely. “She came to my room and talked last night. She’s in earnest, Joy. She must be allowed to try her wings.”

“I don’t see why!” Joy exclaimed. “It’s going to make us all very unhappy. What more does Ros want? I’ve tried to give her everything! She has been happy here, Mary?”

“Perhaps she wants to give, instead of taking, for a time,” Mary suggested.

“I’ll find her plenty to do, if that’s the trouble!”

Mary looked grave. “Joy dear, it’s more than that. Ros is unsettled; she wants adventure. She’s far too strong a character to be content in this quiet place, unless she had her definite niche. It’s true, as she says, that she isn’t really needed here; and she wants to be needed. You’ll have to let her go. If you do, she may come back some day. Let her go, feeling this is home and there’s a welcome waiting for her.”

Joy sat scribbling on her blotting-pad. “I hate to think of her going away. And it will break Maidie’s heart. She’ll go all to pieces without Ros to depend on.”

“I don’t believe it. That other time, when Ros had to go abroad, Maidie rose to the occasion splendidly, and she was all the better and much stronger for the time alone.”

The outer door was thrown open, and Rosamund stood there, flushed with running, her eyes bright.

“I tried to catch Maid and the twins. They walk so slowly that I thought I’d a chance. Joy—Mary—did Maid tell you?”

“Only that you’d had a letter from the new relations, Ros,” said Mary.

Joy did not answer. She was gazing at Rosamund, anxiety, curiosity and a great wistfulness in her face.

“She didn’t tell you who they are? How sporting of her! Such a joke, Joy! My new aunts are the Squirrel girls, who gave us supper with Joan the other night. Isn’t it topping?”

“Gracious! How very odd!” Joy exclaimed, startled. “The girls Maidie thought she’d been rude to?”

“Just that; Audrey and Elspeth Abbott. We loved them. Joan will be tickled to death.”

“You’re pleased about it, Ros,” said Joy.

“Well, look at their letters! Wouldn’t you be pleased?”

Mary came to look, and stood with her hand on Joy’s shoulder. She was several years older than Joy, and there was something protective and almost motherly in the warning pressure of her hand.

Joy laid down Audrey’s letter. “Yes, she sounds very nice. Oh, this other one’s delightful! Is this from the little Squirrel girl?”

“I love the poem and the illustrations,” Mary exclaimed. “These girls sound very cordial, Rosamund.”

“But they don’t know they’ve seen me. I’m going to ask them here, without telling them,” and Rosamund described her plan, her face eager. “You want to see them, don’t you, Joy?”

“Very much. But I don’t like the suggestion at the end of the poem.”

Rosamund took up Elspeth’s letter and re-read it. She laid it down without a word.

Joy looked at her. “Rose, you wouldn’t leave us and go to these people, just for the sake of having a change, would you? If you want a change so badly, why not go to Karen in Switzerland again? She would love to have your company.”

Rosamund stood looking down at her. “It isn’t that. I don’t want merely a change. I want a future.”

“Can’t we give you a future?”

“Yes, and it would have every jolly thing in it that you could think of. But it wouldn’t satisfy me.”

“What do you want, then?”

“I hardly know,” Rosamund confessed. “But I know I can’t settle down here with everything I want.”

Joy looked up at her as she stood, tall and straight and self-reliant, with firm lips and steady eyes, yellow hair coiled over her ears.

“If you go, it will make me and Maid and Jen very unhappy. We’re three to your one. Can’t you put our feelings before your own? Why should your sudden craving for adventure upset all our lives? Aren’t you rather selfish?”

Rosamund’s firm lips quivered. Her castle of dreams fell shattered about her.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that. You’ve been more than decent to me for seven years. If you really want me to stay, I’ll do it, for your sake, Joy. I won’t go without your leave. I want your good wishes in anything I do.”

She fled out into the garden, past Maidlin and down the Abbey path.

Joy sat gazing after her, tight-lipped and frowning.

Mary Devine had been putting together her letters. She came quickly to the table and laid her hand on Joy’s shoulder again.

“Joy dear, you must *not!* You can’t keep her here. She won’t be happy, and neither will you or Maidlin.”

“It’s such nonsense!” Joy exclaimed. “Why should she go?”

“Because something is driving her out. It isn’t selfish; the selfishness will be yours, if you keep her here just for your own comfort. Give her sympathy and understanding, and let her go. Joy, what will Jen say if she hears you’ve been unkind to Rosamund just now? How are you going to face Jen and tell her?”

“Does Jen want Ros to go?” Joy’s voice shook. More than anything in herself she trusted Jen’s wisdom and intuition, which had been her help and safety for years.

“She understands Rosamund’s wish to go and make her own way. Ros can’t bear to have everything done for her. Jen feels she’s right to want to strike out for herself.”

Joy sighed. She sat gazing down at the table.

“I do hate changes! I’ve lost so much. I didn’t want to lose Ros too.”

“My dear, you’ll lose her if you keep her here. Let her go, and she’ll love you for ever,” Mary warned her.

“Mary-Dorothy, you’re an old bully! It will break Maid’s heart if Ros goes.”

“Oh no, it won’t! Maid will be unhappy, but she won’t break her heart. You’ll be generous, won’t you, Joy? Now shall we finish the letters?”

“I don’t care a rap about the letters. I do care about these girls of mine,” Joy rose. “I’ll have to go and find Rosie, I suppose.”

She went slowly from the hall and across the lawn.

“Oh, I’m glad!” Mary Devine stood watching her. “How we shall miss Rosamund! But it would be dreadful if she stayed here unhappily.”

Joy paused by Maidlin, who was snipping off dead roses. “Did Ros go into the Abbey, Maid?”

“Yes. Shall I go after her, Joy? She looked upset.” Maidlin looked upset herself.

“It’s my fault. I’ll have to make it all right. Don’t come, Maid. I hurt Ros a little,” and Joy went on alone.

Rosamund was kneeling in the sunshine in the Abbot’s garden, cutting off dead pansies. Her distress had found expression in action, not in tears.

“It’s symbolic,” she said to herself. “Pansies for thoughts; dead thoughts, dead fancies. Joy can’t understand, and I can’t break her heart. I’ll have to try to settle down to weeding and nurse-maiding and teaching dancing. Dead pansies! What fun it was going to be! If I’d felt Joy and Maid were enjoying it too, and that I could tell them everything and they would understand and sympathise—how ripping that would have been! Well, I’d better put it all away. Dead pansies—what a lot there are to-day!”

“Rosamunda!” Joy stood beside her.

Rosamund’s knees gave way and she sat on the grass. “Joy, you gave me a shock! I didn’t hear you coming.”

“Ros, I couldn’t leave things in a mess,” Joy said. “I hate the thought of losing you, and Maid will break her heart. But I can’t spoil your life. I know no one could have kept me back; I’ve had my time and you must have yours. Do what you feel is right; I’ll back you up. And I’ll help Maid all I can.”

Rosamund sat gazing up at her. Then she leapt to her feet and flung out her hands.

“Joy, you angel! I’ll never go far away! I couldn’t bear it—now; now that you’ve been so beautifully generous.”

Joy caught her hands. “Don’t go too far, Rosie. It’s very hard to let you go at all.”

“I only want to depend on myself and not have everything done for me like a kid,” Rosamund cried incoherently. “I won’t go far, Joy. This will always be home. I’ll have no other home to look forward to now. May I keep this in the background, in case I want to bolt to shelter, as I did when Mother died?”

“This is your home, Rosamunda. You know that.”

“It’s mean to treat you like this,” Rosamund said unsteadily. “I am being selfish and thinking only of myself, as you said.”

“Mary-Dorothy says it’s I who am selfish. Ros, treat me as home in the background and come here whenever you wish, if that’s the best use you can make of me,” said Joy.

“It sounds rather horrid, but it isn’t meant to be horrid,” Rosamund spoke wistfully. “It’s meant to be the biggest compliment I’ve ever paid to anybody.”

Joy laughed a little. “Come and talk it over with Mary and Maid! Leave the pansies; they can wait.”

“Maid won’t talk about it. She never talks about things that hurt. She’ll go away and hide. But Mary and Jen will help. I’m not interested in dead pansies now!” and Rosamund picked up the basket and threw the pansies on the rubbish heap.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GOING TO MEET ROSIE

“Tell me, Audrey!” Elspeth cried.

Audrey looked up from the letter. “It’s from Rosie, but she signs herself Rose. She wants us to go and see her, and she’s sending their car to fetch us, on Thursday. It’s an awkward journey by train, but a quick cross-country run,” Audrey was flushed with excitement. “She sounds friendly and very jolly. Read the letter; there’s a special message for you.”

“Was she wild about my letter? I’ve been mad with myself ever since for sending such a silly thing to a strange person.”

“You needn’t be; she says she loved it. Don’t you think she sounds jolly?”

“Lovely!” Elspeth looked up with shining eyes. “Audrey, she’s one of our sort. We’re going to like her.”

“I’m sure we are. Could we possibly manage to go on Thursday?” Audrey looked thoughtful.

“Oh, Audrey, could we?” Elspeth cried wistfully. “I thought you’d say there wasn’t the slightest chance, and she’d have to come here. It would be gorgeous to see where she’s been living! ‘Abinger Hall’ sounds thrilling! But what about the Squirrel? Could Alice manage alone, for once?”

“No, we’ll close down. I don’t like the thought of people coming and perhaps finding things not very nice. It would be too much for Alice all alone.”

Elspeth spoke with a brave effort. “Would you like me to stay at home? You represent the family; you could go and see Rosie and ask her to come here to see me. I’d do my best to have things nice, and it would be better than Alice on her own.” She looked at Audrey anxiously.

“*Very* much better!” Audrey agreed, much touched. “You’re a brick to make such a sporting offer. But I wouldn’t think of it for a second, my dear. Rosie wants to see us both. She matters just as much to you as to me.”

Elspeth’s face cleared. “Oh, joy! I was afraid you’d say I ought to stay.”

“It would be most unfair. We’ll take a day’s holiday. People can go somewhere else for once.”

“They like the Squirrel best,” said Elspeth.

Till Thursday came, she went about in a dream. As she weeded she thought about Rosie; as she washed-up with Audrey they talked of Thursday, of Abinger Hall and the friends who had been kind to Rosie, of Rose Kane herself and the possibility of her being willing to come and take Eleanor’s place in their lives.

“I can’t see why she should,” Elspeth said again and again. “She has friends, and a home, and a car, and everything she could possibly want. She wants to see what we’re like. But that will be the end of it. Why should she bother about us?”

“That depends on whether she’s contented where she is,” Audrey suggested. “She may be glad of an excuse to have a change. Be practical! What are you going to wear?”

“My brown jumper-suit,” Elspeth said at once. “It isn’t a white frock occasion, is it? She’s asked us to go in the morning. Wouldn’t a Sunday frock look silly?”

“She means us to stay for lunch,” Audrey considered the matter. “But we can’t go in the morning dressed for a garden-party. Your brown suit is fresh and neat; it will do. I’ll wear my

green one.”

“I’d hate to go looking as if I’d dressed up in all my best because Rosie lives at Abinger Hall! I’d rather go looking shabby.”

“There’s no need to do that,” Audrey laughed. “But we won’t be over-dressed. Country clothes, but nice ones! That’s the right idea, I’m sure.”

On Thursday morning Alice, rejoicing in a holiday, dressed up and went in to town by bus, to spend the day at the shops. The Squirrel House remained closed, and Audrey and Elspeth waited for the car in tense excitement.

“It isn’t only that we’re going to see Rosie,” Elspeth confided to the squirrels. There was still half an hour to wait, and she had wandered into the wood, unable to sit still. “It’s the whole thing—the holiday, and the lovely morning, and that we’re going by car and not by train! That’s too thrilling for words.”

“It’s very considerate of Rosie,” said Audrey, following her. “It would be dreadful to have to go up to town and cross London on a day like this! And it would take us all day to find her. She said the car would do it in two hours.”

“Don’t you feel thrilled at shutting the house and having a whole day off?”

“Rather! I can’t remember when I did such a thing before,” Audrey said laughing. “I wonder if Rosie is as much thrilled as we are?”

“I don’t expect so. It isn’t half as much fun for her. She’s just waiting at home till we come. We’re going to see new places, and they sound lovely.”

“And new people! Don’t forget that her friends will be there.”

Elspeth’s face fell. “But shall we have to talk to them? I want to see what they’re like, but I’m sure none of them will want to talk to me!”

“We’ve never heard their name,” Audrey remarked. “She said her friends would like to meet us. There may be one or two, or dozens.”

“I’m not going, if there will be dozens!”

“Elspeth, don’t be silly! If there are dozens, they’ll take no notice of us. If there’s a small family, we shall have to talk to them, of course.”

“You’ll have to talk. I shall keep behind you,” Elspeth said.

“There’s the car!” Audrey cried, at a warning hoot from the road. “It’s early. Come along!”

They ran through the garden, and found a small open car waiting in the lane. A chauffeur was gazing at the Squirrel sign.

“Have you come for us?” Audrey asked breathlessly. “From Miss Kane?”

“Yes, miss. From Whiteways, from the Hall.” The man, who belonged to the Manor, had been coached by Rosamund in what he was to say.

He opened the door, and the girls sprang in. “Gorgeous! I was afraid it would be closed!” Elspeth sighed. “Oh, I do like this! Why don’t we have a car, Audrey?”

“We’ll see about it to-morrow. A Rolls-Royce, do you think?”

Elspeth laughed, and sat gazing at the familiar village houses and lanes. In a few minutes the road was unfamiliar, however, and both girls looked about them in keen interest as they sped through villages and towns and hamlets, past woods and farms and cottages.

“I’ve one overwhelming impression, and that is—pink and red roses,” said Audrey. “Every garden is smothered in them,—pillars and arches and walls.”

“Oh—poppies!” Elspeth cried. “Poppies in the fields and by the side of the road!”

They travelled for a while on a main London road, and were amused by the number of cottages which had tables at their gates, with cut flowers in jam-jars for sale. Every second

house seemed to have superfluous sweet peas and stocks which it was anxiously offering to passing motorists.

“As for the tea places, they make me blush!” Audrey sighed. “To think that we have had the cheek to open another! There are myriads of them! The country is spotted with orange umbrellas and red-checked table-cloths!”

“We haven’t seen one half as nice as our dear old Squirrel,” Elspeth said loyally.

“I wonder any one ever comes as far as the Squirrel without having had dozens of teas. The road is peppered with tea-pots and scrambled eggs!”

They crossed the Thames at last, and looked at one another in sudden realisation that their journey was nearly over.

“Rosie approaches very near!” Audrey whispered.

“I’m scared, Audrey. Ask him to take us home!”

Audrey laughed. “If Rosie is as bad as all that, we can leave early. We’ll be polite and pleasant, but we needn’t see her after to-day unless we like her, Elspeth.”

“That’s true,” Elspeth said, a little comforted. “But I hope she hasn’t too many friends. Couldn’t we ask him who lives at Abinger Hall?” with a nod at the back of the chauffeur.

Audrey shook her head. “I thought of it. But it wouldn’t be polite to question him. Rosie didn’t tell us anything; we’ll wait till we see her.”

The car crossed a triangular green, with church, houses, and village hall set around it, and white roads meeting.

“Whiteways, miss,” said the chauffeur. “The Hall is up this lane, beyond the Abbey ruins.”

“We’re almost there!” Audrey whispered, and grasped the hand that Elspeth had stretched out to her.

“Abbey ruins?” Elspeth murmured, as the car sped under arching beeches. “Where did I hear of a ruined Abbey lately? Who told me about an Abbey?”

“What does it matter?” Audrey rejoined. “We’re going to meet Rosie in about two minutes, Elspeth, my dear!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

A DAY AT THE ABBEY

“Are you really going to be hard-hearted and give your new relations the shock of meeting you in public, Rosamunda?” asked Joy.

“I call it thoroughly brutal.” Jen had walked through the garden and past the lake, and was now settled in a deck chair under a big chestnut tree on the lawn at the Hall. “You don’t know what a blow it may be to them, when they see you and realise they’ve met you before. They may swoon, saying, ‘Only that? After all our hopes? Just Rosamund?’ I do think they ought to have the shock in private!”

Rosamund was firm. “I want you all to watch their faces and tell me if you think they’re really upset, or pleased. I may not be able to judge. They’ll soon be here; it’s almost twelve.”

She wandered about restlessly, more excited than she would have cared to admit.

“I want them to like me,” she confessed to Mary. “I can’t say so to Joy, but if they don’t it will upset all my plans. If they’re polite and proper, after those very friendly letters, I shall know they’re disappointed, and I can’t make plans which include them if I feel they don’t like me. I wish the first ten minutes were over!”

“They’ll like you, Ros,” said Mary. “But it’s hard to wait. Why don’t you meet them at the gate? Then you’d have it over sooner.”

“I said I wouldn’t,” Rosamund wavered. Then she caught Maidlin coming out of the house. “I say, old girl, be a sport and see me through!”

“What do you want me to do?” Maidlin looked at her in surprise. “I thought there wasn’t anything. You’re so keen on these Squirrel girls. I’ll do anything, Ros.”

“Come with me and meet them at the Abbey gate! I can’t wait any longer, and I just can’t meet them for the first time before everybody! I thought I could, but I can’t bear it. Joy will be critical, and Jen’s frightfully curious about them. I must know how they’re going to like me before I introduce them to everybody. Come on, Maid! They may come any minute.”

They ran to the Abbey path together, and through the Abbot’s garden and the cloister garth to the big gateway near the road.

“I don’t think they can have passed yet,” Rosamund looked at her watch. “Wouldn’t it be awful if they turned up and I couldn’t be found?”

“Jen knows where we are. She saw us and waved her hand,” Maidlin said. “The Squirrel girls wouldn’t guess, Ros. They don’t know her or Joy or Mary.”

“No, but they’d think Joy was Joan,” Rosamund retorted. “New people always do.”

“There’s the car!” cried Maidlin.

Rosamund raced across the lawn to the railing and vaulted it in a flying leap, for the car was passing quickly.

Audrey and Elspeth, filled with real nervousness, had yet been stirred to astonished delight as the car left the arching trees, and they saw the railing, the stretch of lawn, and set in its midst the great gabled gateway to the ruins.

“Oh, please stop for one second!” Audrey cried to the man. “Is it really an old Abbey? How beautiful!”

They hardly noticed the two girls, one in a yellow linen frock and one in blue, who stood by the big arch. So they were unprepared for the shock when, as the car slowed down, the

blue-clad yellow-haired girl came flying across the lawn and over the railing, and landed at their side.

“Well, here you are! I say, jump out and walk up through the Abbey, won’t you?”

“But—but”—Audrey stared from Rosamund to Maidlin, who had run up and stood leaning over the railing and gazing at them.

Elspeth, dumb with amazement, could only stare back helplessly.

“You *said* you wanted to be friends! ‘We’re two little squirrels who want to be friends’. Didn’t you mean it?” Rosamund asked reproachfully.

“But you aren’t—you can’t be—”

“Oh! Does Rosie stand for Rosamund?” Elspeth gave a shout of understanding.

“Good for you, Little Squirrel! How I loved your letter! I never told you my name when we met, did I? I’m Rosamund Kane, but my father has always called me Rosie.” She looked at Audrey. “Is it a blow, or a pleasant surprise?”

“Oh, gorgeous!” Elspeth said fervently. “We were so frightened of that strange girl! And now there isn’t any stranger at all!”

“No, she’s vanished. But you’ll have to put up with me in her place.”

“I’m more than glad,” Audrey exclaimed. “But I can’t quite believe it. And yet you quoted Elspeth’s letter!”

“It really is true. You’ll soon be used to the idea,” Rosamund said encouragingly. “There isn’t any other Rose Kane but me. I’m your new relation,—Rosie. Elspeth is my aunt, aren’t you, Elspeth?”

“Oh! How silly!” Elspeth laughed and reddened.

“But you must have known?” Audrey asked. “You understood who we were?”

“Oh, I understood all right. I suppose I ought to apologise for keeping it dark. I couldn’t resist it. Do you mind? It was too priceless to put in a letter.”

Audrey laughed. “Perhaps it was. You felt it would be wasted?”

“Rather! But I say, do let the car go home, and walk through the Abbey with Maid and me! It isn’t our car; it’s Jen’s, from the Manor. We thought you might know ours, as you’d seen it twice already.”

“What a very deep-laid plot!” Audrey said, as she sprang from the car. “I’m glad you didn’t send the big car, as it’s closed. We have enjoyed this open one.”

Rosamund laughed. “I thought you’d prefer the Rover. When Jen acts the Lady of the Manor and goes to open a bazaar or give away prizes, she rolls off in her big saloon; but when we want a picnic or a joy-ride we borrow her Rover. So I sent the Rover for you. Have you closed the Squirrel House for the day?”

“Just for to-day. But please tell us about this! We’ve a thousand things to ask you, but we can’t pass this without a word.” Audrey stood and gazed up at the great gateway.

“Is it the Abbey that belongs to Mrs. Raymond?” Elspeth asked shyly.

“Joan’s Abbey; this is the gate. We’ll go through the Abbey. You shall see it properly after lunch. You must be hungry after your long drive. We go in this way,” and Rosamund led them down a tunnel passage through an old wall.

Maidlin followed, behind the guests. She had smiled at Elspeth, but had not spoken.

Elspeth drew back and waited for her. “Isn’t it topping?” she whispered. “I don’t mean all this,” as an archway showed them the quiet green garth and the arches of the chapter-house. “This is lovely! But I mean about our Rosie being your Rosamund. We never dreamt of it. I like her so much already.”

“She was ever so glad when your letter came. She’d been so worried about you,” Maidlin said.

“But there’s one thing about it I don’t like,” Elspeth confided in a quick whisper, as they crossed the cloisters. “We hoped she’d come and live with us. We need somebody, in Eleanor’s place, and we meant to invite the new girl. But as she’s turned out to be your Rosamund, one of your family and living in this gorgeous place, we can’t ask her, of course. She’d never dream of leaving you and all this and coming to our Squirrel House. Perhaps she’ll come and see us now and then, but that’s all she’ll care to do.”

“You’ll have to ask her,” Maidlin spoke abruptly, to cover a break in her voice. “We don’t want her to go. She belongs to us. But she’ll do what she wants to do. She’s going to talk to your sister.”

Elspeth gave her a startled look. “We never thought we might be taking her away from you. That wouldn’t be fair. Oh, isn’t it difficult? I say, you know!” and in the dark passage leading to the Abbot’s garden with its sunshine and the pansy beds, Elspeth’s hand crept through Maidlin’s arm. “We don’t want to make anybody miserable. We don’t want her to come unless she’s keen. And she couldn’t be; she couldn’t want to leave all this. We won’t ask her, Miss Maidlin;—must I say ‘Miss?’ ”

“Oh, please don’t! And thank you,” Maidlin said hurriedly. “I’ll know it’s not your fault, if Ros goes away. But I’m horribly afraid—don’t talk about it, please. This little garden belonged to the Abbot, and Ros and I keep it in order and sweep the paths and weed the beds. Your pansies made me think of it.”

“It’s very pretty,” but Elspeth was burdened with the thought that their coming might have brought trouble, to Maidlin and perhaps to others.

Rosamund had pointed out the refectory and the dormitory of the monks, as they crossed the garth. “We’ll tell you all about it later. This leads to the Hall, where the others are waiting for us. You’ve heard of them all, I think. Jen has come from the Manor to see you; it’s the first time she’s been out to lunch since Rosemary Jane arrived.”

“Oh, shall we see Rosemary Jane? I feel we were really introduced by her!” Audrey exclaimed.

“In a way, yes, we were. Oh, she’s here, of course. Jen couldn’t be away from her for so long. The whole nursery is here to-day, as the boys have come to play in the sandpit with the twins.”

“Is this where you live?” Audrey paused, as they reached the end of the shrubbery path. “Oh, what a lovely place! Elspeth, do you see?”

Elspeth came after her from the Abbot’s garden, and they stood together looking at the old Tudor house, with its gables and long windows and the stone terrace with the wide steps and balustrade.

“Oh, perfect! Like a picture in a book!” Elspeth whispered.

“There’s another picture, slightly more modern,” Rosamund said laughing, and pointed to the lawn.

A low table with tiny chairs set around it stood in a shady corner, spread for lunch. Watched over by a young maid, Nelly Bell, were four small people, very hard at work on their midday meal. Boys and girls alike wore smocks with tiny knickers to match, but the bronze-haired twin girls were in green frocks with smocking in brown, while the yellow-headed boys wore tussore worked in green. All were bare-legged and bareheaded, but wore sandals.

“The twins are four, and they live here,” Rosamund explained. “The boys are Andrew, who is three, and Tony, who is two. They keep us busy!”

“A quartet of little angels,” said Audrey.

“Only to look at, though. Not angelic all the time,” Maidlin remarked. “Come and see Rosemary Jane!”

Joy had seen them, and was coming across the lawn. “I’m not Mrs. Raymond,” she said, in answer to their startled looks. “I’m her cousin. I’m glad to see you, Miss Abbott. Is this Elspeth, who drew those delightful squirrels? Are you recovering from the shock of finding yourselves related to our Rosamund?”

“We’re still trying to believe it’s really true,” Audrey said. “It’s very kind of you to let us come here to meet her. We understand so much better now that we’ve seen her home.” She paused.

Rosamund said quickly, “Joy is Lady Marchwood. So is Jen, who is just putting her kid into its cradle. It’s dreadfully confusing, but they both have the same name.”

The tall girl with the bobbed yellow curls bending over the cradle looked up and laughed. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Audrey. Don’t you want to see the rest of the family? Elspeth, don’t you love wee babies? She’s asleep, so don’t shout too loudly when you look at her.”

“Oh, may we?” Audrey and Elspeth bent over the cradle. “Oh, what a pet! What a lovely little head!” at sight of Rosemary Jane’s smooth little dark head on the pillow.

“But she isn’t like you and the boys,” Elspeth added.

“Not a curl about her, and as dark as a gipsy. I love small girls with straight dark bobbed hair. That’s what she’ll be like,” and Jen stroked the back of her daughter’s neck. “Isn’t she soft? I love the shape of her head!”

“She may have curls, Jen. It’s too early to say,” said Joy.

“I hope not. Curls are so ordinary! She won’t, you know. She’s too much like her granny Marchwood.”

Joy thought of her husband, whom she saw whenever she looked at Rosemary Jane. “She ought to have been mine. I mean, one of mine should have been like this.”

“Yours! Miss Audrey, aren’t those red-headed twins a picture? Would you have liked one of them to be a smooth-haired gipsy like Rosemary Jane?”

Joy laughed. “We won’t grumble. I’ll be godmother to Rosemary Jane. Come and have something to eat, Miss Abbott. We sometimes picnic outside, as the nursery is doing, but we felt we must feed you properly after your long drive, so we’ll go indoors.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! We’d have liked to be outside,” Audrey cried. Then as they entered the hall—“Oh! No, I’m not sorry! How beautiful and restful this is!”

“We can sit in the garden all afternoon,” Joy said laughing.

That day at the Abbey and the Hall was a sheer delight to Audrey and Elspeth, and every detail lived in their memories, from the moment when Rosamund came flying over the fence to greet them, until she put them into the car again at six o’clock. Lunch in the dark cool hall, with its oak panelling and family portraits, was followed by coffee in the garden, and they rested and chatted quietly under the trees for an hour.

After a visit to the sandpit, where the four babies were busily making themselves dirty and happy, Audrey and Elspeth went with Rosamund into the Abbey, and she led them round the ruins and told them legends and stories of the monks. She showed them the gardens of the Hall and the Manor, and told how she and Maidlin had once been nearly drowned in the lake next door.

Mary Devine had appeared at lunch, but had excused herself afterwards on the plea of proofs urgently wanted. She flushed and laughed at Elspeth's shy but eager greeting—"I've read all your books! Are you writing a new one for Christmas?"—and invited her to come upstairs and see the green study where the books were written.

"Though I really write anywhere," she added. "I love to work out in the garden. But correcting or anything that needs a great deal of space is done up here."

Mary came down to tea, and took charge of the tea-pot, while Joy talked to Audrey, and Jen to Elspeth, and Rosamund and Maidlin handed cups and bread and butter.

"I'm sure you Squirrel people enjoy being waited on," said Rosamund. "We don't do it as nicely as you do."

"It feels unnatural," Audrey said laughing.

After tea Jen and her boys went home, and Mary went with them, carrying Rosemary Jane.

"Doesn't the cradle go too? Shall I carry something?" Elspeth asked.

"The cradle belongs to the twins," said Joy. "Don't you think it's too big for one? Rosemary Jane has her own cot at home. Now, perhaps, you'll excuse me. I have work to do to-night."

She went into the house, and their eyes followed her.

"How very like Mrs. Raymond she is!" Audrey said. "I can see the difference, but the likeness is extraordinary."

"Joy's eyes are a little sad. That's because of Andrew," Rosamund said. "Jen says it used to be the other way. At school you could tell them apart because Joan was more serious; not quite so careless as Joy. But now Joan looks happy always, and there's just that touch of something about Joy; wistful is more the word than sad. She's lost something; Andrew meant a great deal to her. The twins are all the world to her, and she's very happy here; she loves her house, and she has heaps of friends, and Jenny-Wren next door, and Mary in the house, and Maid and me. She isn't lonely; but still there's something. She won't wear colours, and that just expresses what she feels."

"She looks beautiful in gray, but rather like a Quaker," said Elspeth.

"She's lovely in black; or in white. You should have seen her, as we did so often, as May Queen at school! Her train was bright green, and she looked a picture."

"How long is it since Sir Andrew died?" Audrey asked.

"Four years; before the twins were born. He never saw them."

"Oh, poor girl! She must have been just a girl then."

"Two years older than I am now. It was horribly hard on her. But she's very plucky. Everybody here would do anything for Joy."

As they talked together, Joy came out on to the terrace again, and Audrey and Elspeth sat up with exclamations of surprise, for she looked very smart in the uniform of a Guide Captain, with the red tie which showed that her girls were Rangers.

"Gracious!" Audrey murmured. "The last thing I'd have expected her to do! What surprising people you are!"

"Stars! Is she a Girl Guide?" Elspeth whispered.

Joy said a word to Maidlin on the terrace, and then came across the lawn. "I'll have to say good-bye. My girls meet at six, in the village. I hope we shall see you here again soon, Miss Abbott. It has been a real pleasure to meet you. Jen and I are coming to tea at the Squirrel House before long."

“Captain the Lady Marchwood!” Rosamund remarked, as Joy disappeared into the Abbey. “That’s the shortest way to the village. Doesn’t she look *it*? She’s a splendid Captain; the whole Company worships her, and she’s adored by her Rangers.”

“It’s splendid of her to do it, but rather surprising,” Audrey ventured.

Rosamund laughed. “Like to know what screwed her up to it? She hated the idea at first, though she loves Guiding now. She wants to be District Commissioner by the time Elizabeth and Margaret are ready to be Brownies, so that they can all be Guides together.”

“What a topping idea!” Elspeth exclaimed.

“How splendid of her!” Audrey cried. “What a difference it will make to those small girls to have a mother who will enter into all their interests!”

“It’s sporting of Joy,” Rosamund agreed. “Jen put it to her, and she saw how reasonable it was.—I say, Maid!”

Maidlin had come out of the house, carrying a big book of music. She came across the lawn and stood before Audrey.

“Good-night, Miss Squirrel. I hope you’ll come again. Good-night, Elspeth; it’s been so nice to see you here. I have to play for Joy at her Ranger meeting. They’re having country-dancing, and she can’t teach and play.”

“She does, sometimes,” Rosamund urged. “I didn’t know you were going to-night, Maid.”

“It’s hard work to do both, and there’s to be sing-song, so she needs me, Ros.”

“Oh, if there’s singing you’ll have to go,” Rosamund agreed. “You’ll make all the difference.”

“Joy is coming to talk to my Camp Fire to-morrow, about the history of Whiteways and the Abbey,” said Maidlin. “We help one another. Good-night, Squirrels!” and she went off by the Abbey path.

“How jolly for her, to work with Lady Marchwood like that!” Audrey exclaimed.

“Maid’s being very sporting, about you,” Rosamund explained. “She’s in deadly terror that I’ll go away with you. But she likes you, and that’s something. She’s concealing her true feelings like a Spartan.”

Audrey and Elspeth turned surprised faces to her. “But you wouldn’t think of it, surely?” Audrey exclaimed. “You couldn’t want to leave this lovely place?”

“We hoped you would, before we understood,” Elspeth added. “But after to-day we couldn’t ask you to come and live in a tea-shop.”

“Even the dear Squirrel?” Rosamund sprang up restlessly. “We haven’t begun to talk in earnest yet. I’ve heaps to say, but while the crowd were here I couldn’t start on it. You ought to go; it’s nearly six, and the car has to come back after taking you home. Can’t we talk as we drive?”

“We? Do you mean that you—?”

“Oh, I’m coming with you. Why not? The car has to come home. Won’t you have me?”

“We’ll love it, if you’ll come!” the Squirrel girls spoke together.

“We’ll give you supper at the Squirrel,” Elspeth cried.

“Right-o. I’ll come. We’ll have Joy’s car this time,” and Rosamund raced away to give the order.

Audrey and Elspeth looked at one another.

“What does she mean, Audrey? What is she going to say?” Elspeth whispered.

“She’ll tell us in the car,” and Audrey waited in suppressed excitement for Rosamund to come.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE ROSE AND SQUIRREL

“Did you notice how they all have their jobs and how they stick to them?” Rosamund asked, as the car crossed the green triangle of Whiteways village.

“Not at first,” Audrey admitted. “But before we left—yes, I know what you mean. Lady Marchwood with her Rangers, and Maidlin with her Camp Fire Girls.” They had seen Maidlin’s gown and heard all about the Camp Fire during the afternoon.

“And Mary-Dorothy and her books, and Jen and her babies. Jen works hard as Lady of the Manor, when she isn’t needed at home; she goes to social functions, and opens sales and presides at the Women’s Institute, holds garden-parties, gives away prizes; she helps every one who asks her, and they all do. Joy does heaps of useful things in the village, quietly; the Music School, and the working girls’ holidays, and a home for city children, and for cripples; and she writes songs and has them published. Maidlin plays for country-dancing and is studying Italian and French, besides endless singing practice.”

“And what do you do?” Elspeth asked eagerly.

“I’m general assistant. I teach dancing, and I help Jen with her children, and I do odd jobs for Joy, and I weed the pansy beds.”

Audrey looked at her. “You aren’t satisfied. Can’t you make a niche for yourself? Don’t you feel you’re needed?”

“It hasn’t been worth while. I really have been expecting Father to need me in a year or two. So I’ve just helped in all that was going on. Now everything’s changed. I can’t go on, with nothing to look forward to.”

“Oh, come and live with us!” Elspeth cried. “We need you! Come and be Eleanor, only nicer! There’s heaps to do!”

“You’ve proposed that, and Lady Marchwood doesn’t like it,” Audrey read Rosamund’s look. “We can’t ask you to leave her, when she has had you for all these years.”

“She’s been more decent to me than any one could imagine,” Rosamund broke out. “I feel horrible when I think of leaving her, and she doesn’t want me to go. We’ve had arguments about it, you may be sure. As for Maid, she says nothing but looks heartbroken. They want me to settle down there for ever.”

“And can’t you? You’re used to it all, but it’s very beautiful. You’d miss it.”

“I can’t,” Rosamund said. “I’ve thought about it, and I can’t. It seems all wrong that I should go away, when there’s no need and they want me so badly. And yet Jen understands, and so does Mary.”

“They think you ought to go?”

“They’d let me go,” Rosamund corrected. “They won’t try to keep me here. Don’t you see how I feel, Audrey? Here I may be very useful, but I’m just a part of other people’s lives. I want to go out and do things on my own, even if it breaks my heart. What troubles me is that I’m breaking other people’s hearts! I can’t bear to hurt Joy and Maid. And yet I know I can’t be content here, with nothing to look forward to.”

Audrey sat for some minutes with her eyes on the road before replying. Elspeth, in the front seat by Frost, the chauffeur, leaned over the back and gazed at her sister and Rosamund, with no interest at all in the scenery.

“Come and live with us!” she cried again.

“It’s hard to say anything, because we’re so much interested,” Audrey said at last. “If you leave the Hall, I hope you’ll come to us, at least until some other plan opens. We’d love to have you so very much that it’s hard to advise you. I feel we’re tempting you away, and it’s going behind Lady Marchwood.”

“Never mind any of that. Suppose I’m not thinking of joining you. Suppose I want to be trained as something; a nurse, perhaps; or to qualify as a doctor or a secretary or a chemist. There are plenty of thrilling things one could do. The point is, do you understand my feeling that I must clear out of all this niceness and luxury and do something worth while on my own? Do you understand, Audrey?”

“Absolutely. You can’t help it.”

“Oh, cheers! And am I right, or am I an idiot?”

“I believe you’re right. Your nature is demanding something that Lady Marchwood can’t give, for all her kindness.”

“I’ve felt that, in a vague way,” Rosamund agreed. “It’s something I have to find or take for myself. I’ve been waiting here, marking time; but I can’t go on.”

“I’m very sorry for Lady Marchwood and Maidlin. But they can’t keep you here once you’ve realised you want to go. You’d always be restless.”

“It’s ripping of you to want it, Rosamund,” Elspeth’s eyes were shining. “It’s so adventurous! You’ve everything you want here, and yet it isn’t enough. I think that’s splendid!”

“If I could write, or paint, or make anything worth while, I’d be content to stay here and get on with it,” Rosamund explained. “It’s all right for Mary and Jen. They have books and babies every year. But I’m not original or artistic; I like to do things and hustle round and boss.”

“It sounds like Guiding,” Audrey said laughing. “Aren’t you a Guide Captain too?”

“Not yet. I’ve been abroad for several months every year, so I didn’t take on anything like that. I’m not needed. Joy has the Rangers, and the Guides and Brownies have topping Captains.”

“You want to go into business, or organising, in some form or other.”

“I want to keep a shop,” Rosamund said firmly. “It *is* business and organising! I want the fun of it, and I want to make it pay. I’d be simply thrilled when I balanced my books, to see if I was paying my way.”

“You’d be thrilled, if you weren’t,” Audrey said, laughing again. “What sort of shop, Rosamund?”

With glowing face Rosamund described the shop of her dreams, which should collect handicrafts of all sorts for shy or unknown people who were in need, and make them known to the wealthy public.

“But how splendid!” Audrey exclaimed. “It’s a beautiful ideal, Rosamund! You must certainly carry it out.”

“In our empty cottage!” Elspeth cried. “Oh, Rosamund, do! Come and live with us! We’ll send all our people to look in at your windows!”

Rosamund looked questioningly at Audrey. “Is there any cottage near you, in your village? I’d been wondering if we could work together. You’d tell your people of my shop, and I’d send mine to have tea at the Squirrel. Is there any small place not too far from you that I could rent?”

Audrey laughed, but Elspeth's shout cut short her words. "The other half of us! The other half of the Squirrel! Oh, Rosamund, do!"

"Our cottage is one of two, and the other one is empty," Audrey looked at Rosamund with laughing eyes. "It's too good to be true, but it is true. We've been longing to extend and use both houses; if we had unpleasant neighbours in the other, it would just spoil our dear Squirrel."

"We shudder whenever anybody looks at it," Elspeth cried. "But people don't want to live next to a tea-house, and our landlord won't interfere with us. It's waiting for you, Rosamund."

"I'll take it," Rosamund said. "When can I see the landlord? Not to-night, I suppose?"

"But can you?" Audrey hesitated.

"I'll wait till I've told Joy," Rosamund conceded. "After all she's done for me—yes, I'll tell her first. But if you should see the owner to-morrow morning, you might hint that a charming and enterprising girl wants his cottage, will you?"

"But what about the rent?" Audrey asked, much amused. "Is Lady Marchwood to be asked to finance your venture? Isn't that rather hard on her?"

"My aunt, no! Joy and the rest shall help me to furnish, if they want to; I won't refuse a few wedding-presents—well, house-warming gifts, then! But I can pay my way. My mother left me a little," Rosamund explained, "and I haven't been using much of it so far. I'm not expecting to make a fortune in my shop, but I can afford to do it, and perhaps I'll make just a little for myself as well as for the other people. I shan't be able to keep a car, or anything of that sort. But I can keep myself in a little house in the country."

"Your father will give you an allowance, then?" Audrey asked.

"He'll keep on what I've had since I left school. That's only fair."

"You're very fortunate. I doubt if your shop will pay, at least not for some time. But it may be of real help to many people, and if you can afford to keep it going it's well worth doing."

"But you think it will pay in the end, don't you? When I'm known? All your car-customers will go away and tell their friends," Rosamund suggested.

"I'm sure you'll succeed, in time. But it will take time, you know."

"Lucky you!" said Elspeth. "Jolly to have enough to live on. It's just like a fairy-tale! You'll live with us and only use your own house as the shop, won't you?"

Rosamund laughed. "I don't know yet that I can have the cottage. But I think I'll want to live in it and keep house for myself. I shall call on you quite often! Could we see it to-night? It won't be dark. Frost won't mind waiting! I'd rather see the house than have supper."

"You mustn't be too late," Audrey said. "It's a long way. And we haven't the key. But you can see our house; the other is just the same."

"Only the other way round," Elspeth added. "It will be fun to have you, Rosamund!"

"You understand why I didn't drive you myself, I hope?" Rosamund asked.

"Because you had too much to say," Audrey agreed. "You'd have landed us all in a ditch!"

"And it meant driving home alone. Joy doesn't like that. As long as I'm living with her I must do as she wants. She'd have been worried if she'd found I'd gone off alone in the car. But in any case my mind was too full of plans for my shop. I didn't want to think about the road."

"Tell us more of your plans!" Audrey begged.

"How are you going to find the people who do the work?" Elspeth asked.

"Joy will let me sell pottery and handwoven goods made at Whiteways. They have a place in the village, but they want a depot farther from home. The girls are taught the crafts; just a

few girls at a time, who don't want to go into shops or service. Those mean leaving home, and there are girls who are needed at home, but yet want to do something. They find it difficult to dispose of their stuff. Then Mary-Dorothy is in touch with the office where she used to work, and she'll make me known among the girls there. She knew several who did really good work of various kinds, as hobbies in their spare time. I mustn't take rubbish, of course, or I'll let down my standard. We have a constant stream of business girls at the holiday home in the village; now and then we shall hear of one who does work and would like to try to sell it. But I'll be a little careful what I take."

"That's a real difficulty," Audrey remarked. "You may not feel able to help folk who need it badly, because their work is amateurish. You may find yourself selling only for professionals."

"That wouldn't do!" Elspeth cried. "It's the poor ones you want to help! Can't you do something about it, Rosamund?"

"I might help them to improve their work," Rosamund said thoughtfully. "If I'm doubtful of anything I shall ask Joan or Joy to come and judge for me. Joan's clever; she knows all about needlework stunts. And Joy's such a thorough artist in her feelings that she'd never pass anything inferior. I can trust their judgment absolutely."

"But the poor amateurs, Ros?" Elspeth pleaded. "The girls who haven't artistic ideas and who aren't clever? You won't leave them out? They wouldn't expect high prices for their stuff, but they'll want you to sell it for them."

"It's a problem," Rosamund agreed. "I think I shall have two rooms and show my goods in each. One will be good and really beautiful stuff; the work from Whiteways and so on; the other will be a cheap little room, with the raffia napkin-rings and the fretwork photo-frames, and so on. I can't take too much of that sort of thing, but I'd love to help a few dear people who haven't many ideas but are very hard up."

"And you'll look at your clients and decide which room to usher them into," Audrey suggested.

"Yes, but I shall give the wealthy people a chance to see my cheap room and tell them just what it is. Plenty of people will come who would buy a little thing but who couldn't afford good hand-thrown pottery or handwoven silk scarves."

"Far more," Elspeth said. "You won't sell your expensive things."

"We'll see. I rather think I shall."

When the car drew up before the Squirrel House, Rosamund sprang out and ran to stand before the cottage. "It is two! I hadn't realised it. Oh, I must have this for my own! It's perfect!"

"It's very dirty," Elspeth remarked. "But we know a nice woman who would clean it down for you. Audrey's vanished to put on the kettle. Isn't that like her? I never think of things until she's done them."

"I'm sure you want a cup of tea," Audrey retorted, throwing open the window from within. "It's horribly stuffy in here. Rosamund, we weren't expecting visitors, but if you'll shut your eyes to the mess in Elspeth's room we'll show you over the house and you'll know what yours is like."

"What mess in my room? You haven't been up to look!"

"Not now, but I've seen it often enough."

"It's beautifully tidy! Come and see, Rosamund! It's perfect!"

Rosamund laughed and came eagerly to inspect the cottage.

The door opened into a fair-sized sitting-room, with a big open fireplace. "We have to keep this ready, in case of rain," Audrey explained. "Our visitors would take refuge in here if a sudden storm came on while a party was having tea. The kitchen is behind; you've seen that already. There's a smaller room behind also, by the kitchen; we use it for storage, and we have our own meals in the kitchen, when we can't have them outside. But we usually eat at slack times and sit out in the garden."

"The little room will be jolly useful to me," Rosamund looked round eagerly. "A window looking into the woods; how ripping!"

"One big attic upstairs and one tiny one. Lead the way, Elspeth!"

"Now! Isn't that tidy?" Elspeth threw open the door of her room.

"So-so!" Audrey said. "Your slippers!"

Elspeth kicked them out of sight, and picked up a book from the bed. "I was reading that before we started. I was so excited I had to do something. That pencil? I dropped it."

"And left it where it fell. Well, well! How sad!" Rosamund teased, and went to the window. "Oh, a glorious view of the woods! And does Audrey have the front room and look out on the Downs? I shan't know which to choose!"

"It would have been no use giving Elspeth the big room. However big her room, she'd still leave pencils on the floor and books on the bed," said Audrey. "Eleanor used to share this. We can have a visitor now, if Elspeth comes in with me. Perhaps you'll stay with us while you're making ready your own house? I can see you won't live here altogether. You want to be on your own."

Rosamund laughed. "I am rather craving for that. But if I can have your other half I won't be far away."

Audrey ran down to see to the kettle, and Rosamund and Elspeth followed, to find her filling the tea-pot. Elspeth opened tins and piled cakes and buns on plates, and Rosamund took cups and saucers for four from the dresser and carried them out, with a green cloth, to spread on a table in the courtyard.

"A golden umbrella, please!" Elspeth called, following her with a tray of buns.

Rosamund laughed and agreed, and arranged a small tray for Frost in the car.

Elspeth carried it out and handed it to him, with a shy smile. Then she came back and threw herself into a basket chair beside Rosamund.

"Your first meal in the old Squirrel as one of the family! It's topping to think you'll soon be here every day!"

Rosamund leaned forward eagerly. "I shall have a sign painted; a big red rose. I'll have cards with 'At the Sign of the Rose', and a list of the things I sell. Shall we put 'At the Sign of the Squirrel', on the other side, and an invitation to tea and the Squirrel woods?"

"What fun it's going to be!" Elspeth sighed. "We'll be 'The Rose and Squirrel', like an old country inn!"

"The Squirrel and Rose! That's only fair," Rosamund protested.

"Oh, but The Rose and Squirrel sounds better! It has more swing about it."

"More rhythm. Well, if you don't mind—!"

"We must see the landlord first thing in the morning!" Audrey exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. "I see you mean to supply the new ideas we have been needing, Rosamund. You'll be a most useful sister to our house!"

"Pleased to be of any service, Aunty!" Rosamund mocked.

"I don't feel in the least like your aunt," Audrey protested.

“You’re my aunt if you’re anything at all to me. I feel exactly like Elspeth’s niece,” Rosamund retorted. “We’re going to be chums, aren’t we, Aunt Elspeth?”

“I shall send you to bed, if you’re naughty. I’m sure aunts can send people to bed,” Elspeth remarked.

“I’m going, as soon as I’ve eaten all these buns. Making plans for The Rose and Squirrel has made me hungry. I shall plan and dream all the way home,” their niece proclaimed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LUCKIEST GIRL

Rosamund's excitement died down as the car drew near to Whiteways on the homeward journey. The point of view she was going to meet overcame the joy of the one she had left, and she was sober enough as she drove up the long beech avenue to the Hall.

"I can't bounce in on Joy and babble about my shop! It's hard on her and Maid. I'll talk to Joy quietly to-night. But how ripping it would be if they were as keen as I am! If they'd only come rushing out to ask me if it's all right and if everything's arranged, how I'd love it!"

Joy's Ranger meeting was over and she had put away her uniform. She was sitting at her piano in the big hall when Rosamund entered, and Maidlin, in a white frock, stood beside her, singing.

"Is that a new song, 'Traveller's Joy'?" Rosamund went up to the piano.

Joy looked up. "Home again, Rosamunda? It's the beginning of a song. Did you have a pleasant drive?"

"Jolly fine. Meeting go all right? How did the Rangers come through the 'Geud Man'?"

"Not so badly. They liked it. Tell us all about it, Rosie!"

"Ros will be hungry. She hasn't had any dinner," and Maidlin slipped away to see if the meal which had been kept hot was ready.

Joy watched her go, and sighed. "I'll try to help her, but in some ways you mean more to Maid than I do, Ros. She's going to be very sad, when you go."

"I don't; not more, Joy. You're more than all the rest of the world to Maid. If she has you, she'll be all right."

"But there are ways in which you mean more. Did you have a good talk with your new sisters?"

"They insist on being my aunts," Rosamund said laughing. "Elspeth does, anyway. She says she'll send me to bed if I'm naughty."

"How nice they are! I like them both ever so much. And so pretty, Ros! I must see the Squirrel House."

"You're being awfully decent, 'Traveller's Joy'," Rosamund exclaimed, greatly touched. "I was afraid I mustn't speak about our plans. May I really tell you?"

"I want to hear all about it, of course," Joy said quietly. "Maid and I are interested, Ros; don't have any doubt of that. Come and feed, and tell us what you've planned."

Mary Devine, coming down from her study, found Rosamund seated at the table, her soup forgotten, and Joy and Maidlin hanging on her words, as she told of the empty cottage and the 'Rose and Squirrel' of her vision. Mary stood at the head of the big staircase and looked down at them—Rosamund's bright face, full of happy eager looking-forward, Joy leaning back in her chair gazing at her and asking interested questions, Maidlin resting her arms on the table and watching Rosamund's face.

"How wise Joy is! She's conquered herself, and that means she'll keep Rosamund far more really, even though Ros goes away, than if she had kept her here unwillingly," Mary said to herself.

She came down the stair to join the party. "Did you leave the Squirrel-Aunts in their wood, Ros? My dear, what delightful people to discover as your new relations! Think what they

might have been!”

“I’ve been thinking, Mary-Dorothy. But you ought to give my father credit for picking out a girl from a jolly family.”

“There’s something in that! Did you go all the way home with them?”

“Yes, and had tea in the Squirrel courtyard.”

“It’s rather fun, Mary. Wait till you hear all about it,” Joy said. “Ros is converting me rapidly. I’m still sorry to lose her, but I see what a jolly time she’s going to have. If I were her age, I should want to plunge, too.”

“Joy, you angel!” Rosamund cried. “The only thing I had left to wish for was that you and Maid should be keen too.”

“I’m not keen, because it means you’re going away,” Maidlin said.

“Wait till you’ve come to stay with me at the Sign of the Rose! I shall keep a guest-chamber, and I hope you’ll all come in turns.”

“Maid will be your first visitor,” said Mary, sitting down to listen.

Late at night Rosamund crept along the corridor to Joy’s room. She had been listening, and had heard Joy come out of Maidlin’s room, after a quiet half-hour’s chat, and go to the nursery for a last look at Elizabeth and Margaret. As her door closed Rosamund’s opened, and in dressing-gown and slippers and hanging yellow pigtails Ros crept after her.

“Joy, may I come in? For one second?”

Joy had gone to her bed without turning on the light. It was midsummer and the curtains were drawn back from the open window, so the room was not dark.

She sat on the bed and held out her hand. “Come away, Rosie. I’ve been talking to Maid.”

“I know; I didn’t want to butt in. I just want to say thank you, Joy. You’ve been such a sport to-night.”

Joy drew her down and kissed her. “We shall miss you, Rose, but we haven’t the right to stop you. I’ll help you all I can, dear.”

“You are helping! Your good wishes mean more than anything. Are you sure, Joy? I came to say that I’d give it all up, even now, if you asked me to.”

Joy laughed. “I couldn’t sleep for shame, if I did that! I’m interested in the Rose and Squirrel House now, my dear. I want to help.”

“Then I’m the luckiest girl ever!” Rosamund exclaimed. “If you’d only convert Maid for me, too, it would be perfect. I know how badly she’s feeling, by the way she won’t talk about it.”

“I know. I have tried, Ros, and I’ll keep on at her. It’s because she can’t bear to lose you.”

“It’s far better for her that I shouldn’t be here,” Rosamund said. “Everybody says so. Maid won’t depend on herself while I’m here.”

“I know. But in many ways she needs you and you really help her.”

Rosamund kissed her and crept away to bed. But before going to her own room she slipped into Mary’s brown and gold bedroom. Without a word, while Mary sat on the window-seat and gazed at her, Rosamund danced a silent jig in the middle of the floor. Then she stood by Mary, beside the open window.

“That’s how I feel! Mary-Dorothy, all is well! Joy’s a darling, and she’ll look after Maid for me. Good-night!”

“Congratulations, Ros! Then the Rose and Squirrel House is likely to become more than a dream.”

“It’s been a lovely dream. Now I’m going to make it real. I can’t sleep; I’m far too much excited! But I won’t keep you out of bed, Mary-Dorothy. I must tell Jenny-Wren in the morning.”

And Rosamund crept away to bed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE END OF A DREAM

“Another letter from your father, Ros?” asked Joy. She had come down to breakfast to find Rosamund standing by the window reading a letter, while an envelope with an Indian stamp lay on the table.

“Yes, just a note . . . They’re in Madras . . . He tells me his wife’s sisters’ address and suggests I should look them up. Queer that I’ve been able to do it before I heard from him.”

Rosamund spoke casually, but kept her back turned to the room. Her eyes saw none of the roses in the garden, nothing of the lawn and trees.

“I’ll be back in a sec., Joy,” and she went out through the long window on to the terrace. “I think I left a book lying on the grass last night,” she called over her shoulder. “I’m just going to see. I remembered it in the early morning.”

“Joy hasn’t guessed there’s anything wrong,” she crushed the letter in her hand. “She doesn’t see things as Mary does. They mustn’t know; I couldn’t bear it. Can I hide it? Won’t they see? If I don’t go in to breakfast they’ll guess . . . Joy’s satisfied about the letter; and I didn’t tell her any lie, except about the book. *Can* I keep it from them?”

She was white, and her eyes were dazed. She wandered round the lawn, as if looking for the book, and in a corner stood and pinched her cheeks, till she was sure they must be red again. Then, holding her head high, she raced across the lawn and arrived breathless at the breakfast table.

“Has anybody any thrilling letters? Only bills and Income Tax, Joy? Hard lines! Hand them all on to Mary-Dorothy. Look at Mary’s bundle! More proofs, Authoress? Plague of your life, aren’t they? I had only one letter, a note from Father, suggesting I should chum up with the Squirrel Aunts and giving me their address. He’ll be amused to hear I knew them already. What’s Maid so busy with?”

“A letter from Biddy, in France. Read it out, Ros. Mary will want to hear it too.”

“The latest news from your young sister, Mary-Dorothy!” Rosamund proclaimed, and read the letter aloud.

She chattered all through the meal, till at last Mary remonstrated. “You’re over-excited, Ros. Didn’t you sleep? Were you checking stock in your shop all night?”

Rosamund caught her breath and rose hurriedly. “Will you excuse me, Joy? I’ve finished, and as I’ve evidently dithered you all with my babble I’ll withdraw. I’m going to run along and chatter to Jen instead.”

“She won’t be up yet, Ros,” Maidlin argued.

“I think she will,” Joy said. “She’s practically well again. Give her our love and tell her all about The Rose and Squirrel, Rosamunda. She’ll be as thrilled as we are.”

Rosamund fled. But at the door she paused.

“I’m not so sure about my shop as I was last night,” she said, without looking round. “I’ve been thinking, and it may take some time to start it properly. It won’t be easy to collect things at first.”

She crossed the hall, and they saw her stride down the terrace towards the shrubbery path to the Manor.

“That’s a sudden spasm of anxiety,” Joy said laughing. “Is it nerves? She’s usually so sure of herself.”

“She was so worked up last night. Perhaps it’s reaction,” and Mary described Rosamund’s midnight jig of joy in her room.

Once out of sight of the house Rosamund began to run, and raced at top speed down the shrubbery path, across the lane, and through the Manor park. She passed the lake and ran through the orchard to the gardens near the house.

The shortest way into the Manor was through the sun-parlour, the glass-covered porch which Jen and her husband had built to catch the morning sun. Here the babies played in their pen, if the wind was too cold to allow them to be out of doors, and here Jen always breakfasted and sat during the morning.

Rosamund went to the open door of the sun-parlour and entered quickly, without stopping to look round.

Jen, sitting in a low chair and still busy with breakfast and letters, greeted her gaily.

“Come in, early bird! I want to talk about your jolly new family. I’m all alone; Ken’s off to town for the day, and he likes to be away by eight, to avoid the worst of the traffic. What jolly girls your new relations are, Ros!”

“Which car has Kenneth taken? Can I have the Rover this morning?”

Jen looked at her quickly. “Certainly; he’s using the other. Ros, what’s the matter?”

“I must go and see Audrey. I want you to ring Joy up and say I may be late for lunch. Tell her where I’ve gone; say it was a sudden idea, and I found I must talk something over with the Squirrel girls——”

“Rosamund, what’s the matter with you?” Jen demanded, her tone peremptory.

“Nothing much. I’m a bit bothered. I’d rather not—oh, Jenny-Wren!”

Rosamund dropped into a chair. Turning away she hid her face and broke into a storm of sobbing.

Jen leapt upon her and took her in her arms. “Rosie, what *is* it? Is anybody ill?”

“No—*no!* Oh, I’m sorry I frightened you! It’s all right. I’m an idiot. It’s only me; give me a sec., Brownie!”

Jen held her in her arms. “I’ll help, kid. Whatever it is I’ll help. Don’t cry like that! It hurts me to hear you. Try to tell me, Rosie! There’s sure to be something we can do. Does Joy know?”

“Nobody knows,” Rosamund sobbed. “I didn’t mean you to know. I bluffed Joy and Mary and Maid. I talked like a baby all through breakfast, and they didn’t see. It was just bluff. I had a letter—I didn’t want them to know. But you—you saw—I knew once you’d guessed you’d have it out of me.”

“Of course. You must tell somebody, and I’m the best one,” Jen’s tone was motherly. “You’ll tell me presently what the trouble is, and we’ll talk it over together. There’ll be some way out, Ros, never fear. Were you really going to tell these new girls and hide it from us? Ros, how could you?”

“You don’t understand. It concerns them and me. I had to tell them first,” Rosamund was growing quieter. “Brownie, I apologise. I never meant to come and howl on your shoulder. It hasn’t upset you, has it? Will it be bad for Rosemary Jane?”

Jen laughed. “Not a scrap! But curiosity might be bad for us both. Can’t you tell me, Ros? Nurse has Rosemary Jane and the boys; it’s a quiet period. Drink a cup of my coffee! I’m sure

you didn't have a proper breakfast, if all that was being suppressed. Here's Ken's cup; I'll rinse it for you. Now drink that, Rosamunda!"

"I was rather fermenting all through brekker," Rosamund's hand was shaking, as she took the cup. "You're an angel, Jenny-Wren. I thought I came flying to you to borrow the Rover, but I believe deep down inside me it was your shoulder to weep on that I wanted."

"It's at your service at any moment, but I hope you won't often need it for the same purpose. Ros, dear, tell me what has happened! It's serious, to make you go to pieces like that."

"It was such a blow, and so unexpected," Rosamund's voice shook. "Last night I was so excited and so keen, and everything seemed to be going just as I wanted. You all liked Audrey and Elspeth; even Joy fell in love with them and forgave them for wanting me. I went home with them, and in the car I told them all about my shop and they were keen too; and there's a cottage joined on to their Squirrel House, just what I wanted. I saw it, and we made plans, and it all seemed too good to be true. I was going to live next door to them, and we were going to work together and call the place 'The Rose and Squirrel'. Elspeth said it was like a fairy-tale. Then I came home, just full of it, and Joy was interested and so sympathetic. It was the last thing I wanted, and she gave it me; her blessing, you know."

Jen's face cleared. "Oh, I'm glad! I was holding my breath for fear you'd say she didn't! That's not the trouble, then?"

"Oh no! Joy couldn't have been kinder. She said she'd help me in every way. I went to bed so happy and excited that I could hardly lie still, let alone sleep. I went to Mary-Dorothy first and danced 'Molly Oxford', just to work off my feelings. Then this morning"—she caught her breath—"a letter came from Father—a business letter. He's stopping my allowance. He can't afford to keep it on now that he has a young wife to provide for."

She paused, fighting to steady her voice.

Jen sat and gazed at her. Of what use to say that there was plenty of money; that she, or Joy, could provide all that was needed? Rosamund would not accept it.

"It's reasonable. But I hadn't realised it would be necessary," Rosamund went on unsteadily. "He must provide for her. I thought he had plenty for us both, but he says business has been bad for years and it hasn't been easy to send me £120 a year, just for myself. I've always known why he did it, you know."

"Why, Rosamunda?" Jen answered her look.

"He didn't want me out there. He knew I'd come out to him unless he made it possible for me to pay my way at home. He knew I'd cost him more than that if I were out there with him."

"What does he suggest you should do now?"

"I have my mother's money, about £50 a year. He says I should begin at once to prepare for some sort of business life, and he'll be pleased to pay for my training; the £50 will be useful to me when I'm earning, as an extra, he says."

"Lots of girls would be thankful for so much," Jen said thoughtfully. "Ask Mary-Dorothy! But you haven't been brought up on those lines. It's very hard luck, Ros dear."

Rosamund's lips stiffened. "Lots of girls have to support themselves, and I suppose I can do it too. I never expected to need to; he might have warned me. But I can do it, as other people do. That's not the trouble. I'll pull myself together and find a job. I could drive a car; heaps of girls do it. I could even be a secretary-chauffeur; I can type and write shorthand. I'll be all right; it's not that. That didn't drive me to tears in your arms. But my shop, Jenny-Wren!

The Rose and Squirrel—and the empty house next door to Audrey and Elspeth! It's the end of the fairy-tale. Don't you see?"

"I see what a shock of disappointment you had, just when you were so happy about it all," Jen agreed. "You poor kid, it was hard lines! But need it be the end of your dreams, Ros?"

"Oh yes! I can't afford it now," Rosamund said drearily. "The man wants £30 a year for the cottage. I can't live on £20. It would be ages before a shop like that could pay; Audrey said so, and she knows. Now perhaps you see why I couldn't tell Joy?"

"Because she'd have offered instantly to back you in the venture. I'd love to do it myself. Why not, Ros? Let us start you, for the sake of all you've done for us, in all these years!"

"If you're going to begin that, I shall have to go and—and——"

"Sob on somebody else's shoulder," Jen said soothingly. "Don't trouble, Rosie. I won't tease you just now. You want to talk it over with your new sisters. Take the Rover, with my blessing, my child. I'd come with you, but Nurse would have fits; and anyway, I'd have to take Rosemary Jane, and she's rather young for the Rover. But I honestly don't see why we shouldn't finance your venture, Rosamund."

"Don't you?" Rosamund stood looking down at her. "There's no reason, except that it wouldn't be the same. I was so bucked to think I was going to do it on my own. I suppose I'm childish, but it won't be the same if I do it on your money or Joy's.—*No!*" she said sharply, squaring her shoulders. "I'll find a job and save up till I can afford to run my shop myself. I'll do it in time. It's postponed, that's all. I shan't howl about it any more; it was only the shock, and the effort to hide it from Joy, that bowled me over."

"Shall I tell Joy what has happened?"

Rosamund shrank. "No, please; not yet. Wait till I've talked to Audrey. She's a business person and she knows things. And she's five years older than I am. You see that I must talk to her, don't you, Jenny-Wren?"

"I do. The Squirrel girls will feel their sister has done you out of your rights."

Rosamund knit her brows. "In a way it's true. I'd rather not tell them, but after our planning last night I can't help it, can I?"

"Of course not. They've the right to know. You must be fair to them."

"Father suggests I should join forces with them," Rosamund said unsteadily. "He's heard from Eleanor about the Squirrel House. He says perhaps I'd prefer that to a business life."

"You would," Jen said promptly. "You wouldn't like to be in an office all day, Rosie."

"I can't imagine it. I'd rather do anything that would take me out. I'd quite enjoy being a chauffeur. But—oh, my shop! I can't give it up," Rosamund mourned. "The Rose and Squirrel seemed so real last night, and so near to us! It was a fairy-tale, as Elspeth said; too good to be true!"

"Talk it over with Audrey," said Jen. "You must, Ros. You couldn't simply give it up and not tell them the reason."

"And let them think I'd cooled off. No, it wouldn't be fair. I'll go at once, Jen; thanks awfully for the loan of the car. Square things for me with Joy and Maid! They've no idea there's anything the matter."

"I'll say you told me your plans, and points kept turning up on which you had to consult the Squirrel girls, so you went off in the Rover."

"Yes. Thanks, old dear!" and Rosamund went gravely to the garage.

"Good luck!" Jen stood at the door waving good-bye. Then she went back to the sun-parlour, and sat thinking and staring into the sunlit creepers until it was time to take Rosemary

Jane from Nurse.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE PARTNERSHIP

“Why—Rosamund?” Elspeth left her weeding of the blue border and raced to the gate, shouting to Audrey to come.

“This is unexpected!” Audrey lifted her last tray of scones from the oven, and came out to the garden. “Haven’t you been to bed? Is something wrong, Rosamund?” she asked quickly, realising that the happy excitement of the night before was gone from Rosamund’s face. “Won’t Lady Marchwood consent?”

“But can she stop you?” Elspeth cried. “You’re of age!”

“Yes, but Ros will want her consent, after all these years of being friends,” Audrey said.

“It isn’t that. Joy was a dear and said she’d help. I had a letter from Father this morning,” Rosamund handed the letter to Audrey. “Read it. Then you’ll understand.”

Audrey stood under a green umbrella, with Elspeth at her elbow, and they read the letter together.

“Oh, the pig!” cried Elspeth. “Oh, how mean! Oh—I say, Rosamund, I’m sorry. I forgot he was your father. I wish he wasn’t. Then I could say what I really think.”

Audrey and Rosamund were gazing at one another.

“It knocks everything to pieces,” Rosamund said. “I can’t afford that cottage now.”

“It’s a blow,” Audrey admitted. “And it’s on Eleanor’s account. I feel as if we were to blame.”

“That’s rot. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“But Eleanor’s gone barging into your family, and she’s taken your place and your money,” Elspeth cried. “It *is* mean, Rosamund! We hate it as much as you do!”

Audrey touched her shoulder. “Leave it to Rosamund and me, Elspeth. You may stay and listen, but only on condition you don’t interrupt.”

“I won’t, Audrey,” Elspeth promised, sobered by her tone.

Audrey drew two chairs close together under the big umbrella, and looked at Rosamund. “Let’s talk it over quietly.”

Rosamund sank into a chair. “The letter was a shock, and I fled to the Manor and cried over Jenny-Wren. I don’t often collapse, but I howled over this. I was so keen on the Rose and Squirrel, and now it’s all over. I won’t cry again, Audrey; that’s done with. But I’m sick with disappointment.”

“Elspeth, would you fetch lemonade and glasses and biscuits?” Audrey suggested.

Elspeth went eagerly. Her lips were trembling at the thought that Rosamund had cried. “She’s so splendid! She must have been nearly dying, before she’d cry!” she whispered, alone in the kitchen.

“What about not driving alone?” Audrey postponed the discussion to give Rosamund a few moments of rest, and to wait for Elspeth.

“I forgot all about it. Jen knew I was coming alone; she didn’t mind.”

“What did Lady Marchwood say about the letter? I mean Lady Marchwood at the Hall?”

“She doesn’t know yet. I wanted to talk to you first. Thanks so much! I was thirsty,” and Rosamund took the home-made lemonade gratefully.

Elspeth handed a glass to Audrey, and sat on a cushion at their feet to listen.

Rosamund looked at Audrey. “The Rose and Squirrel will have to wait till I’ve made some money; not a fortune, but enough capital to run the shop till it begins to pay. I shall take a post as a chauffeur-secretary; I’ll quite enjoy it, and it’s so useful that I’ll surely find a job easily. I know all about cars; all about driving, and I can learn the rest quickly. I can write—and read—shorthand, and I can typewrite and keep accounts. It will be tons better than an office. I want a job that will take me out.”

Her eyes wandered round the garden, and fell on the weeding basket. “More dead pansies! My last ones came to life again, but these won’t. The Rose and Squirrel *is* dead, for a time. But only for a time, Audrey. I shan’t forget; I’m far too keen. I shall save up, and as soon as you think I’ve enough in hand I shall start planning again. Perhaps your other half will still be empty.”

Audrey glanced at the second cottage. “It seems a great pity.”

Elspeth gave a sob. “The fairy-tale’s over. Oh, Rosamund, we were keen too!”

“But it was a fairy-tale,” Rosamund said drearily. “Everything was too easy. Things don’t happen like that.”

“No,” said Audrey. “And there aren’t fairy godmothers round every corner. But sometimes courage and imagination will go a long way. I don’t believe the Rose and Squirrel is dead.”

Rosamund and Elspeth looked at her. “But it’s put off into the dim future?” Rosamund queried.

“I’m not so sure of that. Did you mean what you said—that you’re ready to work hard at some job until you save up enough to run your shop? To work really in earnest and steadily?”

“Of course. What else can I do? I’m not going to settle down at the Hall and live on Joy Marchwood’s money, though I know she’ll want me to do something of the kind. This letter from Father just shows how right I was in saying I must leave the Hall and work for myself,” Rosamund said with energy. “I’m glad I’d planned it and won Joy’s consent before I knew about the money. It would have been far harder for her to agree if she’d known it meant I had to keep myself. So far she doesn’t know I’ll have to earn my bread and butter; butter, if possible!”

“Oh, I think you’ll earn jam and cake!” Elspeth gazed at her with admiring eyes. “You’re too clever and—and responsible to earn only bread and butter.”

“I’d have had to leave the Hall now, if I hadn’t thought of it before,” Rosamund looked at Audrey.

She nodded. “You couldn’t have stayed on and felt dependent on Lady Marchwood.”

“Horrors, no! I’ve paid my way all along. We had a fearful fight at first; Joy wanted me to be a perpetual visitor at the Hall. I said Father was paying for my keep, as he ought to do; and she could use the money as she liked, but if she didn’t take it I’d go and live in rooms in London. So she had to give in, though she didn’t like it; and there have been two special kids from the East end of London, in the Cripples’ Home in the village, who are always known as ‘Rosamunds’, because they’ve been paid for with my quarterly cheque.”

“Won’t there be any more Rosamunds now?” Elspeth asked.

“Joy will see to that,” Rosamund turned to Audrey again. “I have £50 a year, from my mother. Why do you say the Rose and Squirrel isn’t dead? I could take the cottage, but I couldn’t live on £20.”

“No, but you could find your job here, and earn your keep, and still have your cottage,” Audrey exclaimed.

Rosamund sat up, her face ablaze with excitement. “Audrey—how? What job could I find in a village? And I’d have no time for my shop, if I took a job. What do you mean?”

Audrey leaned forward and laid a hand on her knee, her face eager also. “If you really mean to work—but it all depends on that?”

“Of course I do! Well?”

“You’ll take the cottage, for £30,” Audrey spoke breathlessly, while the other two sat tense, hanging on her words. “You’ll allow us to use the front room, for teas in wet weather. You’ll have a big table for your goods, and you’ll use the small room as office and stock-room. You’ll start in a quiet way, but it will be a start and not a postponement for years. You’ll live with us, as regards food, and fire and light in the winter; but you’ll sleep in your own house. Elspeth and I would much prefer to keep our own bedrooms.”

“But I can’t live on you!” Rosamund interrupted. “You can’t feed me. Do you mean—oh, do you mean that you’d give me a job?” Her face lit up. “Audrey, could I help you, enough to make it worth your while to have me here?”

“I’m going to offer you a job, instead of the chauffeur-secretary stunt,” Audrey retorted. “Not for wages, but for your keep. We’ll dismiss Alice; the hotel has already offered her more than we can give her, but she wouldn’t let us down. We’ll run the Squirrel without outside help. I haven’t thought it out, but I propose that you and I should take alternate days of waiting on people and of working in the kitchen. There has to be some one constantly filling kettles and cutting fresh bread and butter. Elspeth will be assistant to us both, as well as gardener. We’ll all work together at the washing-up at night.”

“Oh, joy!” Elspeth whispered, and gazed hungrily at Rosamund. “You will, won’t you, Rosamund? It won’t be as thrilling as being a chauffeur, but you’ll have the beginnings of your shop to look after as well.”

Rosamund was white with intense eagerness. But she hesitated. “Audrey, should I be worth it, honestly? I’d work like a horse, and I’m strong. I can cook just a little; a friend taught me, when she stayed at the Hall once and cooked for us. But I can’t do anything very posh. You’d have to use me for the really dirty work and keep me right in the background.”

Audrey laughed. “On the contrary, I should prefer to be the cook in the background and keep you very much to the fore. I’m sure such an ornamental waitress would be a real attraction; and I’m so tired of carrying trays, and Elspeth hates it.”

“Oh, I’ll be your waitress! But I don’t see that I’ll earn my keep.”

“I’m sure you will. You’ll let us use your big room rent-free; and perhaps your kitchen, when we’re rushed. We’ve wanted the extra room for some time, but we couldn’t afford it.”

“I’m beginning to hope it might be worth your while as well as gorgeous for me!” Rosamund exclaimed. “Perhaps, if I could give you an extra room that you’ve been needing —”

“Audrey!” Elspeth gave an excited cry. She sprang up and ran to the low stone wall between the two front gardens and stood gazing.

The other two stared after her. “What’s up?” Rosamund asked. “What does she see?”

Elspeth turned to face them, waving her arm towards the second garden in a royal gesture. “Fruit! Where we have paving-stones and flowers—gooseberries and currants, and millions of raspberries and logans. Audrey, you know how we envied old Mr. Williams when he lived there, and how wild we were because he didn’t use the fruit. It will all be Rosamund’s now. What do you suppose she’ll do with it?”

Rosamund leapt to her feet. “Jam—jelly; home-made! Fresh fruit salad! Little pots of jelly on your tea-tables! A jam-factory in my kitchen! Audrey, that would help the general fund, wouldn’t it? Is that what you and Elspeth wanted to do last summer?”

“Just that,” Audrey said laughing. “We were buying raspberries every day, and just across the wall were pounds of them going to waste. People like raspberries and cream in July; we could have made a lot of money out of that garden.”

“The rasps aren’t ripe yet,” Elspeth craned over the wall. “But there will be tons in another fortnight, and logans by the bushel in the back garden. There are arches covered with them.”

“I begin to see my job, so far as the summer is concerned,” Rosamund said exuberantly. “Audrey, I’ve made up my mind, if you have. It will take me a little time to move and settle in, but if I’ve taken the cottage the fruit will be mine, and you could use it. Could you keep on Alice till I can escape from Joy and come here to live? Would that give Elspeth time to pick the fruit? I’ll come and help as soon as I can, but I mustn’t be too brutal to Joy and Maid. It’s all so sudden.”

Audrey laughed. “If you’re certain that you mean to do it, take the house as soon as you can and let us start on the fruit, for the birds are making off with it. We’ll find a small girl or two, and set them picking in the evenings, and Elspeth and I will boil it up into jelly. Shall we go round the garden?”

“Oh, *could* we? *My* garden!” Rosamund murmured. “That old wall won’t keep me out!”

“Not after the way you vaulted over the fence outside the Abbey!” Elspeth said admiringly.

Rosamund, with a laugh, went flying over the wall and landed on a parsley bed. “The old man who lived here hadn’t many ideas. Forget-me-nots are very nice, but they seem to have been his only flowers! Come along, Elspeth! We’ll pull down that wall and make it all one garden.”

“Oh no, we won’t,” said Audrey, crossing the two-foot barrier more sedately. “It’s a beautiful old flint wall. We’ll plant stone-crop in the cracks, and have a gap beside the house.”

Rosamund laughed again, and peered through the dusty windows. “My front room! My lattice windows! My passion-flower on the porch! And my red roses over the door! Come and see my fruit garden and the loganberry arches!”

The path from the door to the green gate was bordered by forget-me-nots in great banks of pale blue. Behind them were the gooseberry and currant bushes which had roused the envy of the Squirrel girls. At the side of the house a narrow strip of land held a path lined on each side by raspberry canes, heavy with the promise of fruit. Behind the cottage was a tiny lawn with long grass, three apple-trees, and a tangle of loganberries on two sides, while on the third the line of raspberries was continued to the end of the garden. On the walls were old plum and cherry-trees.

“It’s a sight in spring, with the blossom,” said Elspeth. “The woods behind are like a dark wall. We’ve planted some thin little trees, but they look skinny beside yours.”

“The people who had the Squirrel House before us went in for flowers and had almost no fruit,” Audrey said. “We’ve often wished we had this garden instead of our own.”

Rosamund stood looking round her domain. “It would break my heart if I didn’t have this house now. Audrey, if working for you will make it possible, I’ll work till I drop!”

“I’ll see that you don’t. As soon as we heard about you, we hoped you would want to join us,” Audrey explained. “When we saw where you had been living we felt we couldn’t ask

you. But your father has made it possible for us to suggest it. Rosamund, you're going to be a real help to us, and I hope we'll be the same to you."

"My pansies aren't dead, after all. My dreams have come to life again! I shall plant pansies, to remind me how nearly I lost it all. And I thought I'd have to go and chauffeur for Lady Somebody! It will be much more fun to make jam for my aunts!"

Audrey laughed. "Isn't it more suitable that your aunt should offer you a job than any stranger?"

"But what will you do with me in the winter? There won't be enough for three of us then. Aren't things very slack?" Rosamund asked soberly, as they went back to the Squirrel garden again.

"There's always a little business. People go on the hills and come to the woods even in the winter. But if I were you," said Audrey, "I'd tell my father that I would take his offer of training and go during the winter for a thorough course of cookery in London. I'll show you all I know about cakes and fancy dishes, but you might do the whole course, since he has given you the chance, and be a qualified cook, with a full diploma. You might find it useful sometime."

Rosamund looked thoughtful. "I'll think it over. I'd rather not take anything more from him."

"That's silly," said her aunt severely. "It's his duty to equip you for earning your living, if he can't provide for you. If you don't want training, you should ask him to furnish the cottage for you."

"I won't ask him for anything. But perhaps I'll have the training. I'd like to feel there was one thing I could do really well. Now, where does my landlord live? I can't go home without seeing him!"

"I'll come and introduce you. He's a very good friend of ours," Audrey said. "Elspeth, I shan't be many minutes. Can you manage?"

"First rate," Elspeth said valiantly. "But I hope nobody will come," she added.

"It isn't likely, at this time in the morning," Audrey threw off her overall. "I foresee that we shall do much business with Rosamund's friends. Lady This and Lady That will be coming to see her, and we shall give them tea, and they'll tell their friends of the charming new place for picnics."

"It will be a jolly good thing for the old Squirrel," Elspeth agreed.

"I shouldn't wonder. Joy and Jen and Mary are coming at the first possible moment. It was only Rosemary Jane that kept Jen at home to-day," Rosamund said. "We'll have heaps of extra custom on my account. The whole Hamlet Club will come to see their ex-Queen giving raspberry teas. The Hamlet Club? At our old school. We were all May Queens in turn, even Maid. Joy, then Joan; and much later I and Jenny-Wren and Maid, were all crowned by the Club, and we still meet for folk-dancing. When the Club hears about the Squirrel House, they'll come in car-loads.—I'm going home feeling much happier than when I came, thanks to you, Auntie!"

Audrey took her seat in the car. "A little way up this road. It won't be just as you'd planned, with everything starting with a flourish, and you presiding in a lordly fashion over your beautiful artistic shop. You'll work up to that by degrees, but it means hard work in the meantime."

"But I shall have it some day. It was the thought of giving it up for years that knocked me over. I'm beginning to think it will be more fun this way. I'll know I'm working for my shop,

and when I have it at last I'll know I've made it for myself and not just taken it from Father."

"It's more independent," Audrey agreed. "And you're an independent sort of person."

"It's going to be more of a partnership too," Rosamund remarked. "I like the thought of that. We talked of the Rose and Squirrel, but they were going to be separate, though under one roof. Now the partnership will be a real thing."

"I like it much better too. We'll work together for our venture."

"At first I was mad, and fearfully upset. But now I think perhaps Beautiful Girl hasn't done so badly for me, after all."

"What?" Audrey stared at her. "What did you say?"

"Oh, my aunt!" Rosamund groaned. "You weren't meant to hear that! Forget I said it, please!"

"Beautiful Girl? Is that Eleanor? But why?" Audrey asked laughing.

Rosamund grew scarlet. "That's all Father told me about her at first; that he'd married a beautiful girl of about my age. And that her name was Nell. I couldn't call her Nell, or Mrs. Kane. Maid and I always call her Beautiful Girl."

"But she isn't," Audrey protested. "You'll be disappointed when you see her. It's nice of him to think it, and very natural and proper; but Eleanor isn't a beautiful girl. You're much more of a beautiful girl than she is! She's nice enough, and very good company; smart and jolly, and all that, and quite good-looking. But she's not a beautiful girl, except in Mr. Kane's imagination."

"Afraid I shan't remember to call her anything else. She's Beautiful Girl to all of us."

"What a shame!" Audrey said laughing. "I hope she'll come home and give you a shock. This is the house! I'll come in with you, and then I must hurry back to Elspeth."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ROSAMUND'S HOUSE

Maidlin closed the piano after half-an-hour's practice, and turned to Joy, who sat at her writing-table, discussing the morning's letters with Mary. Mary, as usual, had a pad on her knee and sat on the broad sill by the open window.

"Ros is staying a long time with Brownie, Joy," Maidlin stood fingering a bowl of yellow roses, the colour of her short frock. She was so slight and small, beside the rest of the household, that it was difficult to believe the tale of her coiled black hair, that she was twenty-one. Joy, glancing at her, thought she looked, and often seemed, more like seventeen.

The telephone bell rang before Joy could answer. Mary was rising when Maidlin interposed.

"I'll go, Mary-Dorothy. Perhaps it's a call from the Manor."

They heard her reply, in a subdued tone,—“All right, Jenny-Wren. Thanks!” and she came back to bring the message. “Jen wants us all to go to her for lunch in the garden. And she says Ros has gone off in the car to see those Squirrel girls again. She may be late for lunch. She told Jen all her plans, and new points turned up that she had to see the girls about. You'd think she'd talked enough to them yesterday, wouldn't you?”

Mary glanced at her and then at Joy. “I'll type these letters, shall I?”

“Please, Mary-Dorothy! Let's send them off and be done with them. The rest don't matter,” Joy agreed.

Mary took the letters and went to her study upstairs, and Joy rose. “Come into the garden, Maid! The babes are going to play with the boys and Jen, so we aren't needed.”

They went out on to the terrace together, and Joy sat on the edge of the stone balustrade above the lawn. Maidlin fetched two cushions from the hall and handed them to her, and Joy laughed.

“You do take care of me, don't you, Maid? Let's sit down here.”

She dropped the cushions on the stone steps leading to the lawn, and Maidlin sat down and leant against her knee.

“Feeling a little sore, baby?” Joy's voice was gentle.

“Is Ros going to like these girls better than us?” Maidlin's pent-up anxiety found vent.

“I don't see any sign of it. They're jolly girls, but I don't imagine Ros would think of them in the same way as she thinks of us—not by thousands of miles. Maid, you're rather mean to doubt Ros after all these years.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't think of that. Of course, she couldn't forget us all at once,” Maidlin agreed. “But she does seem dreadfully keen on them, Joy.”

“It's not the Squirrel girls she's keen on, though she likes them very much. It's her new plans,” Joy explained. “These girls happen to be part of her new life. She's desperately keen on that, Maid.”

“Must she really go away?” Maidlin's voice shook. “We've had her for seven years, Joy. We can't say good-bye for ever!”

“It may not be for ever. Ros knows she can come back. But we'll have to let her go, Maid. She came to my room last night,” Joy said quietly. “And she offered, even then, to give up all her hopes if I wished it. When I let her see I sympathised with her, she just fell on my neck.

Then I understood that we'd have to let her go. I saw that Mary was right, and we shall really keep Ros more closely if she goes, feeling we're backing her up, than if we keep her here unwillingly. That would make a barrier and a division, and none of us would be happy. But if we sympathise, she'll still be one of us, wherever she is; and she'll come back often. Now, Maid, I've seen what we have to do. You see it too, don't you?"

"Be keen about her going away? It's awfully hard, Joy!"

"I know. I feel it too. But if it keeps her loving us as much as ever?"

"It would be worth it," Maidlin admitted. "I wonder if I could?"

"We've made a mistake about Ros," Joy said. "We've allowed her to feel she wasn't needed here. All that she says is true; she has no definite place and we could do without her, except in our hearts and feelings."

"That's where she matters most."

"Yes, but it isn't a thing we can explain to her. We can't ask her to stay just because we feel it's jolly to have her; it wouldn't be fair. I wish we had made her feel we needed her more! Then she might have been more content now. She says she wants to do something worth while."

"Wasn't it worth while helping everybody? She did help everybody here!" Maidlin cried. "Joy, if we made her feel we missed her, would she come back?"

"Not just now, while she's so keen on all these new ideas. But she might come later on, if she grew tired of her shop, or if she doesn't like her aunts when she lives with them."

"She will like them. I like them, though I wish they wouldn't take her away. I can't think of Elspeth as Rosamund's aunt! Joy, I shall try to make Ros feel we need her. Perhaps it's not too late," Maidlin exclaimed. "Then if later on she wants to change, she'll come back to us."

"Don't tell her what you're up to, or it will be no use," Joy warned her.

"I shall begin asking her to help me about the Camp Fire. I've never consulted Ros much about that," Maidlin said thoughtfully. "I know you all say I rely on her, but I have done the Camp Fire on my own, because I started it when she was abroad and I've felt it belonged to the girls and me. I've told Ros about it, but I haven't asked her to help. Perhaps it was a mistake. I shall ask her now."

Joy laughed. "The really big thing is to make her feel you're interested in her plans, Maid, and not to let her think you're jealous of the Squirrel girls. That would hurt her and make real trouble."

"She wouldn't tell us any more about them. That would be awful. I'm not jealous of Elspeth, Joy. She can't help being related to Ros. I am jealous of that shop, but I won't say so."

"With Ros at the moment it's a case of 'Love me, love my shop'. You'll win her heart—if there's any corner that isn't yours already—by being interested in the shop. That's what last night taught me," said Joy.

They walked over to the Manor presently with Mary, and found lunch awaiting them on a table spread under the trees, with a smaller table for the boys and the twins.

"I was lonely," Jen explained. "Ken's in town for the day. So I thought I'd have you three as well as the twins."

"And being a spoilt person you must have what you want," said Joy. "What did you say to Rosamunda to make her shoot off into Sussex again?"

"She told me all her plan. It's rather fascinating. I do hope she's able to carry it out."

"Oh, she'll do that! Whether it will pay or not remains to be seen."

Jen looked thoughtful, but did not hint at her fuller knowledge.

“We’ll have lunch late. Perhaps she’ll come in time,” she said, and they sat talking of Rosamund and her plans.

They were still waiting when the little car came racing up to the door, and Rosamund, hatless and wind-blown, came across the lawn.

“You didn’t wait for me? Angels! You must be starving. Will you have me in this weather-beaten state? The car behaved beautifully, Brownie; I had a topping run.”

“What took you off in such a hurry, Ros?” Joy asked. “You had no thought of it when you left us.”

“Let her have a bite to eat, Joy!” Jen remonstrated. “She must be hungry. We’ll hear about it soon.”

She glanced anxiously at Rosamund, and was relieved to see that she looked less burdened than when she set out. Rosamund caught her eye and laughed.

“All right, Jenny-Wren. Aunt Audrey has solved the problem.”

“Oh, how clever! Already? I am glad, Ros! Then you won’t need to——”

“Sob on your shoulder. No, I won’t,” Rosamund said lightly.

“What are you talking about, you two?” Joy demanded.

“You never sobbed on Jen’s shoulder, or on anybody’s, Ros,” Maidlin cried.

“I’ll tell you presently,” and Rosamund talked of the road, and squirrels, and the car.

She sat silent over her coffee, and the others gazed at her, waiting for her story. At last she looked up.

“It’s a little more awkward than I thought last night,” she said to Joy. “You see, Father feels he can’t keep on my allowance.”

“Rosamund! You don’t mean,” cried Joy.

“I’m glad she’s told them,” Jen addressed the coffee-pot. “It’s much better. Tell us the new plan, Rosie! You’ve made one, it’s obvious.”

“Ros, do you really mean he won’t go on providing for you, because he’s married?” Joy demanded.

“He says he can’t, and I must believe him. I hadn’t thought about it, but it’s reasonable. He’s paid out for me for years, and I’m of age, and he has Beautiful Girl to pay for now. I called her that to Aunt Audrey, by mistake,” and Rosamund gave a rueful laugh. “She nearly died. And she says Eleanor isn’t a beautiful girl, and it’s Father’s imagination.”

“But what are you going to do?” Joy and Maidlin spoke together.

“Keep myself. It’s high time I did. Work for my living, as other people have to do.”

“There’ll be an earthquake, if she says she’s going out as a chauffeur,” Jen remarked to the pot.

Rosamund laughed. “I’m going one better than that. I’ve taken a job as a waitress and washer-up and supplementary cook. I’ve also taken a cottage and a garden full of fruit.”

“You’ve had a busy morning,” Jen commented. “Congrats!”

Her words were lost in the outcry from Joy, as she demanded an explanation.

“My Aunt Audrey has offered me a job. It’s very suitable to go into partnership with my aunt!”

She described the new plans, and told of the joyful discovery of the fruit garden attached to her cottage and of the ‘jam-factory’ to be begun at once. “It’s all going to be the greatest fun. Don’t you think so?” she pleaded.

“Heaps of congrats, Rosamunda!” Jen cried. “That’s something like a plan! You’ll have your shop yet. I shall buy your jam, though I can’t say we need it.”

“It’s all wrong!” Joy said vehemently. “Rosamund, if a girl of your personality and education is content to wash cups and cut bread and butter and pick gooseberries all her life,—oh, it’s absurd! You can’t waste yourself like that.”

Rosamund looked at her. “The first thing for a girl of my personality and education—if they really exist—to do, is to show that she can keep herself and pay her way. I’ve let Father pay for me too long. But I felt he was responsible for me, and so long as he could do it, it was right that he should. Now I intend to look after myself.” Unconsciously she squared her shoulders.

“But need you wash dishes?” Maidlin faltered.

“It’s ridiculous, when we’re aching to have you here!” Joy stormed. “Why shouldn’t you stay here? There’s heaps of room and all the money you need, and we want to have you. You know we’ll give you anything—everything!”

“But I have some self-respect!”

“Joy dear, do be sensible,” Jen urged. “Ros can’t live on you indefinitely. She’d never be able to look herself in the face, and if she couldn’t do that she’d never have her hat on straight.”

Rosamund gave a shout of laughter. “Jenny-Wren, you angel! No, nor my hair done decently. Joy, don’t look so tragic! I’m not going to starve, or be somebody’s chauffeur, which I thought of seriously this morning. I’m merely going to be one of the Squirrel girls, and we’re going to help one another. After all, it’s Father’s suggestion, though I’m not doing it for that reason. Audrey needs help, and I need a job. We join forces, that’s all. And she is my aunt. It’s very suitable.”

“It’s absurd!” Joy said wrathfully. “It’s waste! You could do much better work, if you must work. Rosamund, do show a little sense! If you really want a job we’ll help you to find a good one. Washing-up and making jam isn’t good enough for you.”

Rosamund leaned forward and spoke eagerly. “Oh, but that’s only for a start! And I shall have my shop, in a small way, and my own house. It’s going to be the greatest fun, and well worth working for. If I’m sick of cups and saucers and hating the sight of a currant, I’ll think about my house and plan how I can make it jollier still. I’ve been seeing visions all the way home; colour schemes, wall-papers, curtains! Maid, aren’t you thrilled? I’ve seen the landlord and the house is mine. I shall send a cheque for the first quarter’s rent to-night. You can’t think how independent it feels!”

“Shall you really have a house of your own?” Maidlin began to kindle into interest.

“Two rooms and a kitchen, and two attics, my dear! It will all need decorating, so I’ve a gorgeous chance to make it pretty.” Rosamund looked at Joy. “Do be a little excited, Joy! He’s knocked five pounds off the rent, because I’m related to the Squirrel girls and it will be all one business. I’m to have my house for twenty-five pounds a year. Isn’t that topping?”

At sight of Joy’s face Jen gave a shout. “Ros, Joy wants to give you a cheque for five hundred! How can she be thrilled that you’re saving five pounds?”

“Five pounds is extremely important,” Rosamund said with dignity. “Five pounds will decorate the bedrooms. I only have to choose the colours.”

“Can’t you afford to have the kitchen and the parlour done too?” Jen asked, with mock gravity.

"Oh, I know you'll offer to do it all for me! But there's no need, thank you," Rosamund retorted. "I have twenty pounds a year for clothes and extras, and I shan't need clothes for the first year, unless my shoes wear out, so I can afford to spend a little on my house."

"Your shoes will wear out," Jen said laughing. "I suppose you'll allow us to give you housewarming gifts?"

"Wedding-presents! Without the fag of a bridegroom, for whom I've no use at all," Rosamund's eyes danced. "I might allow that, Jenny-Wren, if—if you were all happy and sympathetic, you know. I couldn't take presents from any one who wasn't happy about me, could I?" and she looked at Joy.

"You can have anything whatever that you like, from the Hall!" Joy broke out.

"Oh, thank you, Joy! Thanks ever so much! I'll have your piano, and the twins, and Mary-Dorothy's brown pots, and her filing cabinet, and the typewriter, and Maid, and the car; and perhaps you and Mary had better come as well," Rosamund said modestly.

Joy laughed in spite of herself. "Ass! I shall furnish your bedroom."

Rosamund looked thoughtful. "I don't know."

"Oh, you can choose everything! But I'd like your own room to be my present for your new beginning," Joy surrendered bravely.

Rosamund's eyes softened. She knew her terms were accepted. "Thanks, Joy dear. If you'll give me simple things, suitable for a cottage, I'll love you for ever. I'd like best of all to take the bedroom things I've used for so many years. Could I have them?"

"No!" Joy cried. "Your room will stay as it is. I'll buy you others just the same, if you wish, but your room must be ready for you, as it has been when you've gone abroad. You must feel it's waiting for you at any moment."

"That's ripping of you!" Rosamund exclaimed, much touched. "I shall come to stay whenever I need a holiday, Joy."

"That's what we want. If you ever stay with Jen, without asking me first——!"

Rosamund laughed. "I won't, if I know my room is waiting at home."

Joy made no comment on the word, but she felt comforted.

Mary had been listening. Now she spoke. "Ros, I'm sure Bidy would like you to have her blue-grey bedroom ware, and all the pots and bowls that belong to it. You were always her chum; she'd want to give you something for your house. We can write and ask her, but if you care for the blue jug and basin she'll certainly give them to you."

"Oh, cheers!" Rosamund cried. "I was wondering if I could afford hand-made pottery! I love Bidy's blue; thanks awfully, Mary-Dorothy! I'll arrange my colours to go with it."

"I shall have much pleasure in furnishing your kitchen and stocking your larder. Miss Kane," said Jen.

"I'll give you all your curtains and the china you'll use in your own house, Ros," Maidlin cried. "We'll choose them together; we'll go to London for a day! Will you have those cottagey cups and plates with oranges on them?"

"You are nice, all of you! I'm almost furnished already!" Rosamund exclaimed.

"I shall find a cabinet of drawers, for your papers and accounts, like the one Joy gave me when I came to the Hall, if that's really the thing you covet most of my possessions," Mary promised. "You'll find it useful."

Rosamund fell on her neck. "Useful? Mary-Dorothy, I've coveted yours for years! I shall have to give a party, to show off all my treasures!"

“We shall talk of nothing but Rosamund’s house till we’ve seen the last of her,” Jen remarked. “When Ken hears about it, the first thing he’ll say will be—‘And what can I do for the house? I can’t buy curtains and tea-cups’! He’ll be really hurt if he’s left out; you know how he loves you, Rosamund.”

“I didn’t. Frankly, I didn’t know Ken loved me,” Rosamund jeered. “But if he wants to help on the good work, what about whitewashing the outside of the house?”

“I don’t believe he’d do it a bit well,” Jen said seriously.

“Neither do I. But I think he could write a nice little cheque extremely well.”

Jen laughed. “You may consider the outside decorating and repairs off your mind. They shall be Ken’s concern.”

“I’ll love him, if he’ll do that for me! I do want it to look pretty. I’m going to plant roses in one corner of the garden as soon as I can afford it,” Rosamund said eagerly. “I mustn’t take out the currant bushes, for they’re valuable, and the raspas are worth their weight in gold to the Squirrel House. But a garden all currants and gooseberries would be fearfully dull! There are seas of forget-me-nots; I shall dig up some of them and plant roses. If I’m going to hang up The Sign of the Rose, I must have roses!”

“You mustn’t buy them, though,” said Mary. “Couldn’t we all give you roses? You’d love them far more.”

“The twins will give her roses!” Joy announced. “You wouldn’t leave the poor children out, would you?”

“Oh, you mustn’t!” Rosamund cried laughing. “I daren’t mention a thing that I want!”

“Andrew and Tony and Rosemary Jane would like to give Aunty her Rose sign, to hang over her door,” said Jen. “In years to come they’ll be frightfully bucked to know it was their present.”

“I knew I was going to love my house! But if every single bit of it is a present from one of you dear people, I shall love it more than I ever dreamed,” Rosamund exclaimed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A VISIT TO THE SQUIRREL HOUSE

Rosamund's final removal to the Squirrel House was delayed by unexpected action on the part of Sir Kenneth Marchwood.

As soon as he understood from his wife that Rosamund was in earnest, and that the Squirrel House was likely to be her future home, Kenneth insisted on seeing it for himself.

"It's perfectly safe and sanitary!" Rosamund protested. "The Dragon next door is a big place and a great protection, in spite of its name. It's a real old country inn, and Mrs. George is a dear. We could always depend on her for help."

"Not Mrs. George of the Dragon, surely, Ros?" Jen remonstrated. "It's too good to be true."

"But it is true. We'll love to show you the Squirrel House, Ken, but there's no need for you to worry about me."

"I'll see for myself," and on the first day that Joy and Mary had no engagements, Ken packed the family into his big car and drove them off to see the Squirrel House.

Jen sat beside him in the front seat, with Rosemary Jane held carefully in her arms.

"My daughter requires attention every two hours. As this is an all-morning trip she must come too. And she wants to see Aunt Rosamund's house. Ros, she tells me she wants her present to be something separate from the boys' gift. She doesn't mean to be looked on as just a little extra; she's the eldest daughter of the house and she wants her rights. So she means to give you blankets, and when you're warm and cosy in the winter you can think of Rosemary Jane."

"I shall!" Rosamund promised. "But there won't be a single thing left for me to buy."

"You'll find things to spend your cash on, never fear!" said Kenneth.

Joy and Mary were in the back seat, and Maidlin and Rosamund on the small seats which were let down in case of need. It was a tight fit, but nobody was left behind.

The Squirrel House looked very attractive, with its low thatched roof and gable windows, the hanging sign among the creepers of the porch, the paved front courtyard with its green and gold umbrellas, the blue border of larkspurs and lupins, the pansies on their stone pedestals. Elspeth, in her fresh lavender pinafore, with wavy yellow hair, was waiting on two lady artists, who had come for morning coffee before going into the woods for a day's painting.

"Pretty house! Pretty girl!" said Kenneth, as the car drew up.

"Rosamund's Aunt Elspeth," Jen told him with a laugh.

Elspeth, with one glance at the laden car, fled indoors, calling, "Audrey! Audrey, dozens of people in a big car!"

"I can't come for a moment," Audrey exclaimed in dismay. "These scones will burn. Ask them to choose their table and sit down."

"It's us," Rosamund proclaimed from the doorway. "About a dozen of us, Audrey. Ken's helping Jen and the babe out; we've come to see the Squirrel House. I'll look after them, if Elspeth will help. Don't worry! We don't want to interrupt."

"Oh, if it's only you and your family!" Audrey said laughing. "I can't leave these scones. Tell them to make themselves at home, Rosamund. I'll be ready presently."

"I'll show them round my house."

“Give them coffee and cakes first. Elspeth will wait on you.”

“Please, may I slip into your sitting-room and sit down quietly with my baby for a few moments? She’s never had such a long ride before, and she needs a few minutes away from everybody,” and Jen appeared behind Rosamund.

Audrey laughed and nodded. “Do please excuse me! I’d have been ready if I’d had any idea. In there, do go right in! Nobody will disturb you. Can we give you anything?”

“Not just now. I’ll put her to sleep and then come for my coffee. Thanks awfully!” and Jen carried Rosemary Jane into the quiet cool room and sat down to attend to her needs.

Rosamund found Maidlin eagerly showing the garden to Mary and Joy. “Choose your umbrella and pull up your chairs! Elspeth and I will bring you coffee. That’s the Dragon, Ken; just across our wall. You shall interview Mr. and Mrs. George; they’ll assure you they don’t keep a noisy pub! Isn’t it pretty, Mary? Don’t you love the blue border? Joy, how do you like my house? It’s very dirty, but you must imagine it clean and beautiful.”

“I’ll look for its possibilities,” Joy promised, gazing up at the empty cottage.

Maidlin insisted on being a waitress also, with the result that when Audrey and Jen came out together, they were thrust into chairs, with coffee-cups in their hands and plates of cake in their laps, before Audrey knew what was happening.

“We were falling over one another; three of us, waiting on Joy and Mary and Kenneth,” Rosamund explained. “Sit still, like a good aunty, Audrey. Now we really have something to do. Are you all supplied? Then we kids will take a green table, since you’ve bagged a golden one.”

The lady artists in their corner sat on and on, watching Jen as she went in to look at Rosemary Jane, well padded with cushions into the corner of a sofa; watching Audrey, whom they knew well, accepting the position of guest in her own house with laughing dignity; watching the younger girls as they fetched relays of cakes; watching Rosamund, as with much mockery from the rest she made out a lengthy bill and presented it to Kenneth. They rose at last and paid their own bill to Elspeth, and went into the woods reluctantly, with a glance at the big car standing at the gate.

The result of Kenneth’s inspection of the cottage appeared at night, when after consultation with Jen he delivered an ultimatum to the family gathered on the lawn after dinner.

“Rosamund, I don’t mind whitewashing your jolly little house——”

“Personally? Oh, Ken, do you think you’d better?”

“Not personally. St. George, at the Sign of the Dragon, will find us workmen. But the thing I’m really anxious to do,” said Kenneth, “is to give Rosamund a bath.”

There was a shriek of protest. “Oh, not personally,” he conceded laughing. “But she must have a bath.”

“Kenneth, don’t be absurd!” Rosamund cried. “Baths in cottages aren’t the thing. We use a tub in the kitchen.”

“Tubs in kitchens are all very well when you’ve grown up in tubs in kitchens, but you haven’t, my dear girl. I’m going to give you a bathroom. That small room next to your kitchen will do very well, and you can still have cupboards and shelves in it for your ‘stock’. I insist on a bath with a tap.”

Rosamund rocked with laughter and delight. “Ken, you are silly! My bath will be the talk of the village! We’ll exhibit it at so much per head.”

“What a commercial mind! Your business instinct is growing, my child. Mock, if you like; I know you enjoy your morning tub, and you won’t take the trouble to bring out a tin thing and fill it day after day.”

“I suppose that’s true. I might grow slack, and I do love a cold splash,” Rosamund said reflectively. “Ken, you’re rather a dear to think of it. Did Jen put you up to it?”

“Not I. He thought it out for himself, while I was nursing Rosemary Jane. He came to me and said, ‘I say, what’s Rosie going to do about her morning tub?’ He is rather a lamb, isn’t he?” Jen said proudly.

“A perfect lamb. Ken, I’d love a bath with a tap, but can it be done?”

“Easy as anything. You have water in the house already. I’ll see your landlord, but he won’t object; it’s improving his property. What about a geyser?” Kenneth asked helpfully. “They’re a great comfort.”

Rosamund stared at him, while Jen was rude enough to giggle.

“But she hasn’t any gas,” said Maidlin. “They use lamps and candles.”

Jen and Rosamund went off into peals of laughter at sight of Kenneth’s face.

“Put in gas and electric light for me, please, Ken!” Rosamund pleaded. “You’ll only have to bring them a mile and a half from the village!”

Kenneth laughed, and said no more about the geyser.

“I’m awfully much obliged to you, Ken,” Rosamund sobered down and spoke earnestly. “I’d love to have a bath. But you won’t insist on putting it in at once, I hope. Can’t I wait a month for my bath? You’ll spoil all our plans if you interfere with our raspberry harvest, and workmen would make a fearful mess. What I want to do,” and she looked at Joy eagerly, “is to go right now, and stay at the Squirrel House for about two months, while you have your summer holiday; and then in September, when the jam and jelly are made and Audrey’s busy time is over, to have the decorating of my house done—and the bath put in! There’s no time for any of that just now. I’m going to borrow the camp-bed Joy gave to Mary-Dorothy, in case she wanted to have visitors in her own rooms; and I’m going to camp out in the kitchen at the Squirrel, and see how I like good solid work, and good solid results, instead of loafing and having everything done for me. I’ll come back later on to pack my things; I shall take just a suitcase at present. Don’t you think that’s wise?”

“A sort of trial trip,” Jen agreed. “You can be thinking out plans for your house, now that you know we’re behind you.”

“It’s a good plan,” Joy said. “Don’t take too much at first, Rosie.”

Rosamund laughed. “You’re thinking I shall soon have had enough of it. But I have to do something, Joy, and this sounds to me much more fun than being somebody’s secretary and living in their house. I’m going to have my own house, and I’m going to love it; but I have to work for it, and I want to do it. You can come and see me sometimes, Maid.”

“Oh, I shall come,” Maidlin said. “I shall want to ask you things.”

“I’d rather have waited till my own house was ready,” Rosamund admitted. “But I must play up and help during the rush season, and we can’t have workmen crashing through the raspberries. So it must all wait till September. I shall plan colour-schemes while I’m picking currants, and arrange my rooms while I clean the pans. You can all help me by collecting news of people who do any sort of work and who would like me to show specimens and sell them on commission. The sooner I can build up a good business and make my shop pay, the sooner I’ll be able to stop washing-up and have a girl to help Audrey. Then I’ll concentrate on my shop and my jam-factory.”

“We’ll make inquiries for you,” Joy promised.

“And some day, when I’ve had my cookery course, we’re going to do a large trade in home-made cakes, and Elspeth is going to drive a little car with a van attached, and deliver orders. I’m sure Joan will order cakes from the Squirrel!” Rosamund exclaimed. “Audrey has always wanted to do it, but she hasn’t had time and she couldn’t deliver her goods. We’re going to branch out in all sorts of ways.”

“And by the time you’re thirty you’ll be rolling in wealth, and the proprietor of an enormous business,” Jen said laughing.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SHADOW OF MAIDLIN

“A fortnight to-day since you came, Rosamund!” Audrey came out from the cottage. “What’s the verdict? Do you never want to see a currant again?”

Elspeth looked up anxiously. “Are you tired of it, Ros?”

Rosamund laughed. “I’m more tired each night than I’ve ever been in my life before. Those bushes will break my back before we’ve done with them. But it is fun! Don’t look so scared, Elspeth; I love every bit of it.”

She and Elspeth were sitting in low chairs with a great bowl of red currants between them, preparing them for jam. Rosamund wore one of the blue smocked overalls which had been a special gift from Joy and which had roused Elspeth’s envy when she saw them.

“Here’s Maid! I thought she’d come to-night,” Rosamund said presently. “Want some tea, Maid? Audrey’s tea-lady to-day; isn’t she clean? Just look at my hands! I’m dyed pink for life.”

“I’d like tea, and then I’ll help,” Maidlin sat down beside her. “Have you been busy?”

“You should see the jelly I made last night! It jelled beautifully. Joan came to tea yesterday, and she ordered six pots. She’s out of quarantine, so she’s going to see you all next week. She hasn’t seen Rosemary Jane yet. I say, Maid, such fun! I slept in my own house last night!”

“But it isn’t furnished!” Maidlin cried.

“No, but I slept in it. I carried my bed in there, and Audrey lent me a rug and a chair, and I put Biddy’s lovely blue basin and jug on a packing-case. It was camping out, but it was in my own house. I felt fearfully bucked! I’d had it all cleaned down by Mrs. Davy, who works for us, and it looked so tempting that I couldn’t stay out of it. I feel it’s really mine now.”

“Can we go over it presently? I’d like to see it without the cobwebs.”

“Rather! Will you have raspberries and cream? A shilling a portion—oh, but I suppose you’re living on them at home!”

“I’d like some. Did you gather them?”

“Sure! We have huge baskets every day. I’m all over scratches, but they don’t last. We’re doing a roaring trade in rasps and cream. Oh, Maid! Tell Joy I’ve sold some pottery and I’ll want more. A jolly party in a big car fell in love with the green bowls and beakers and went off with all I had.”

“You are going ahead! That’s topping!” Maidlin said enviously. “Is it as much fun as you thought, Ros?”

“More! I love to feel I’ve begun to build up my business. And I’m worth while to Audrey; she says so, and I can see it for myself. I save her in heaps of ways, and we don’t need Alice. It’s a real partnership. Here’s your tea; where has Elspeth gone, Audrey?”

“To take tea to the man in the car,” Audrey spread the table for Maidlin.

“I’ve something topping to tell you, Maid!” Rosamund said mysteriously. “It only happened yesterday. I’m thrilled to the limit about it!”

Audrey laughed. “She could hardly sleep for excitement,” and she went to fetch the tea-pot.

“But what is it, Ros?” Maidlin asked plaintively.

Rosamund picked currants off their stems and dropped them into the bowl at express speed, as she told her story.

“A boy in the village here—a big fellow of eighteen—crippled in a motor-bike smash two years ago. Audrey told me he carved wooden animals, so I went to see. The jolliest little models, Maid; perfect! When I asked if he’d let me show a few and try to sell them for him, his mother broke down and cried. I nearly wept myself at sight of his face. It’s not so much the money, though they’ll be glad of it; but he’ll feel he’s of some use to his people if he can sell his carvings. It was like new life to him.”

“That’s gorgeous, Ros!” Maidlin exclaimed. “But are they really good? Not just trash?”

“Well, do you know what I did? I asked if he had any squirrels, and he showed me one, and on the spot I ordered a dozen, for our tea-tables. They’re to have slits in the top, to hold menu cards, and Elspeth will draw squirrels on the cards. I wouldn’t have done that unless they’d been good.”

“No, you wouldn’t have them here if they were trashy,” Maidlin agreed. “Wasn’t he pleased?”

“Jim? He didn’t know what to say. I thought he was going to weep too. I brought the bunny home; you shall see him when I’m less pink. I must wash before I touch anything. Jim makes cats and dogs and horses and rabbits and pigs and hens.”

“Hadn’t he tried to sell them?”

“It hadn’t occurred to him. Nobody knew about them, and he didn’t know how to show them. I believe there are heaps of other people doing good work and unable to make it known,” Rosamund’s voice took on a serious note. “I shall find them in time. This poor lad had been lying there for months, working away, just because he had to do something, and giving those lovely little models to the village kids. One day Elspeth saw a child playing with two or three; she saw how jolly they were and asked where they came from. The kiddy said, ‘Jim Watkins. He makes ’em all day long’. Elspeth told Audrey and she hunted Jim out. But she hadn’t any shop and didn’t feel she could begin selling goods, as well as all the rest.”

“So that’s where you come in,” said Maidlin. “I am glad, Ros! But how is it that Jim is so clever? Has he had lessons, or is it just with practice?”

“They’re a very skilled family,” Audrey, explained, hearing the question as she put down the pot. “The father’s dead now, but he was one of the best thatchers in the district. It’s very skilled work. Jim has taught himself to carve because his own trade was impossible; but it’s in the family to have clever hands and a trained eye.”

When the currants were all picked over and Maidlin’s tea was cleared away, Rosamund brought out the little brown squirrel, and Maidlin examined it closely and approved.

“It’s beautifully made. I could do with some for the Camp Fire, Ros. It’s almost our first birthday; I’d like to give the girls some small thing to mark the day. Could you order a dozen different little creatures for me? I must buy them through your Rose shop, of course.”

“Topping!” Rosamund cried. “You’re a sport, Maid! It will help both Jim and me. Choose your beasties! I’ll make a list.”

“Ask him to make them wild creatures, so far as he can; a rabbit, and a fox, and a deer, and of course a squirrel, and a dog, and a cat. If he can’t do a dozen different, then two of each would be all right. The girls will love them. I was wondering what I could give them. There couldn’t be anything better. And Joy will want some for the Twinnies, I’m sure.”

“I’ll see Jim to-night,” Rosamund promised. “He’ll be fearfully bucked. But I’ll order them direct for you, Maid. There’s no reason they should go through the Rose. That means

commission! Be business-like!”

Maidlin coloured. “But I’ve ordered them through the Rose. You’re the Rose shop, and I’ve only heard of them through you. I should be mean if I asked for them straight from Jim. You must let me play the game.”

“Oh, all right! It’s jolly decent of you, Maid.”

“Besides, I want them to come from the Rose. I shall like them much better, and so will the Camp Fire. I shall tell them about Jim, and about your Rose shop.”

Rosamund laughed. “Right-o! Tell them I’m going ahead like anything. Now come and see my funny bare house!”

She led the way into her own house, which was fresh and clean, with wide-open windows everywhere. Beyond the few necessaries in the front attic, the rooms were empty, but on each window-sill stood a bowl or jar of roses, scenting the whole cottage.

“Joan brought those, from the rose-garden at Rayleigh,” Rosamund said. “Next year I shall have my own. She asked how I was going to furnish, so I showed her the list of the things you had all promised me. You should have heard her laugh when she came to ‘Kenneth—bath.’ Do you know what she offered me, from herself and Jack and the children?”

“I thought we’d thought of everything,” said Maidlin.

“She’s going to ask Margia Lane to do some water-colour sketches of the Abbey, and the garden at the Hall. And Jack’s going to have some of his jolly photos enlarged and framed for me. There isn’t anything I’d like better.”

“Oh, how lovely!” Maidlin cried.

“I shall hang the photos of the Abbey all round this room,” and Rosamund waved her hand round the big sitting-room. “They’ll be brown, in brown frames, and the walls will be cream, a plain paper, with brown woodwork. We shall have little tables with yellow cloths, and yellow cushions and brown curtains. With three or four coloured pictures of Margia’s—Joan said four—and the big photos, I shan’t need anything else on the walls. I’d thought of trying for some of those coloured posters, but it will be much jollier to have the Abbey and the Hall and the Manor all round my room!”

“You’re sure you’re going to stay here?” Maidlin’s voice was wistful.

“Now, Maid! Isn’t it all the greatest fun?”

“Yes, but—you work so hard, and you’re so tired at night. Elspeth told me.”

“Isn’t it worth working for? Think how pretty your china and curtains are going to look in my yellow room!”

Maidlin sighed. “I shall have to come and stay with you. What colour will my bedroom be?”

Rosamund laughed. “Both rooms will be white, but the big one will have blue curtains, to match Biddy’s pottery, and the small one green, because it looks into the woods.”

“I’ll sleep in the green room,” and Maidlin went into the kitchen to admire the lengthening row of jars of jam and jelly.

“My aunts are thrilled about my bath. They’re going to keep on good terms with me, once it has been put in,” Rosamund said seriously. “I’ve learnt how to clean lamps, Maid. I was terrified of them at first. And I understand Audrey’s oil cook-stove. I expected it to blow up whenever I went near it, but I find it doesn’t.”

“Aren’t you tired of washing cups?”

“Oh yes! But it’s all part of the game. I like to see the scullery change from being a mountain of plates into clean emptiness and a full dresser. Give Ken a message from me,

Maid! Tell him he was right, and his bath is going to be the greatest boon to all of us. I'm finding out what a fag it is to fetch out the bath and fill it when I'm tired, or when I merely want to splash. I'm longing to turn on a tap and be done with it. I shall bless Ken every day!"

"I'm glad he thought of it. Ros, I want you to help me; I want advice."

Rosamund glanced at her. "What's the worry? Come and help me pick gooseberries;—no, you'd better not. You can't do it in my big gloves and we've none tiny enough for your little paws."

"I'll do it without gloves. I'd like to help."

"You'll go home all scratched, my dear."

"I'll be careful. It's the Camp Fire, Ros. The girls are so difficult sometimes," Maidlin sat on a stool with a bowl in her lap and attacked a bush of red berries.

Rosamund listened to her tale of a rowdy meeting, which she had obviously found hard to control.

"Give them something new to think about, Maid. They're feeling stale."

"But what, Ros? How can I start anything new in July?" Maidlin's voice was plaintive.

"You can't. Hint at new ideas for the autumn, and let them have a picnic or two, and then close down for a few weeks. You're all going off to Yorkshire, aren't you?"

"To Jenny-Wren's old house on the moors. Joy says the change of air is good for the twins. Jen's going to take the boys to the seaside; Whitby, I think."

"And Rosemary Jane, I hope?"

"I always forget her. We're so used to saying 'Jen and the boys'. I wish you were coming with us, Ros! You know you love the moors."

"August is our busy month. We shall give meals from eleven o'clock till dusk. And I shall sell heaps of stuff and make a real beginning," Rosamund's voice was jubilant.

Maidlin sighed, and gathered gooseberries in silence.

"I need you for something every day, Ros," she said at last.

"Jolly good for you to have to do without me," Rosamund retorted. "Make up your mind about things and stick to it, Maid."

"I'm always sure I've made it up wrongly."

Rosamund laughed. "I'd rather decide things and chance making mistakes than never be able to decide anything at all."

She saw Maidlin off in the car, and went to her washing-up, shaking her head. "Poor old Maid! It would be almost better if she didn't come. She does so hate going away! And I can't have her depending on me over Camp Fire stunts; she never used to consult me. She mustn't begin relying on me because I've come away. If it goes on I shall have to do something drastic."

She sat in her attic room one night, a few weeks later, and frowned over a letter from Maidlin, written from the Grange, Jen's girlhood home in Yorkshire. Maidlin outlined her plans for the autumn and begged for Rosamund's opinion.

"I can't run Maid's Camp Fire for her! It's the one thing she's always done on her own. What am I to do about this?" Rosamund's worried frown deepened.

It had been a busy day. The fruit was over, but picnic parties came to the woods in an endless stream, and the Squirrel girls and Rosamund had no breathing-space till darkness fell. The kitchen and the big room of the second cottage were in constant use; although decorating had been impossible, a certain amount of furnishing had been done; Jack Raymond's enlarged brown photos and Margia's colour-sketches hung on the walls of the sitting-room, and the

tables and coloured cloths and curtains and cushions had all appeared. The Sign of the Rose hung over the door, and a big table in one corner held specimens of craft work, which sold occasionally.

Rosamund, thoroughly tired out, still wore her blue smock as she sat by the open window of her attic and re-read Maidlin's letter by candle-light. She was sorely tempted to take it in next door and consult Audrey, but loyalty to Maidlin held her back.

"I can't talk about her to anybody. I must find the way through this for myself, but it is a worry. Maid's going to try to rely on me, although I've come away. She simply mustn't," and feeling very troubled Rosamund prepared for bed.

She answered the letter after a short delay, saying she thought the new plans sounded interesting and she hoped the meetings would go well, but offering no suggestions. Then she turned to work again, hoping that after the Yorkshire holiday Maidlin would have forgotten this new impulse to dependence and would run her Camp Fire by her own efforts, as she had done hitherto. The matter had troubled Rosamund, however, and she looked forward to the return of Joy and her family to the Hall less joyfully than she had been doing.

"If Maid's going to be silly, things will be very difficult," she said to herself, as she ironed her smock and Elspeth's lilac overall.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A HOUSE-WARMING

“Tell us all about it, Rosie!” Joy and Maidlin sprang from the car. “We’ve come for tea and ices and to hear all your news! How’s business?”

“Splendid. We’re flourishing, I’m going to town soon to take my diploma course. Then if you’re ever left cookless, as we were once, you can wire and I’ll come and take care of you.”

“Are you really going to do it in earnest, Ros?” Joy asked, sitting under a green umbrella.

“Rather! I want to be thoroughly qualified, and I can spare a few weeks; it doesn’t take years! Father has sent the cheque for my fees, as he promised; he seems pleased to hear what we’re doing. They may come home in the spring; he’s having fever and isn’t well enough to throw it off, so he may retire and come home.”

“Do you hope they will?”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Rosamund retorted. “It would have mattered once, but now he has Eleanor to look after him. They won’t come here; we’ve no room for them.”

“Ros, I’m full of things I want you to advise me about,” Maidlin said. “Will you come into the woods after tea?”

Rosamund glanced at her. “My dear kid, I haven’t time to wander in the woods! Ask Elspeth.”

“I don’t want Elspeth,” Maidlin said indignantly. “If she could go, why couldn’t you?”

“Strawberry or vanilla, madam?” Rosamund asked professionally of Joy. “Indian or China?”

“I want to see your pictures,” and Joy went to the door under the Sign of the Rose.

There were six coloured sketches; of the Abbey gate, the cloisters, the Abbot’s garden, the view from Rosamund’s old bedroom, the Manor lake, and the terrace of the Hall.

“Six! I thought Joan said four?” Joy asked. “Oh, but you had one already, your May Queen picture, that Margia gave you when you were crowned. Did she put in an extra one from herself?”

“Just what she did; I can’t think why every one has been so kind. Wait till my walls are clean soft yellow!”

“Yes, it will be a pretty room. You’ll have plenty of people here, if you make the place beautiful.”

“Audrey thinks I’ll have to put off my cookery course till December and finish it after Christmas, because people keep coming all the autumn to see the woods. But I shall have the decorating done soon now; at the end of September. That’s too early for the real autumn colours.”

“I shall give you a beech-brown smock to wear in the autumn, when you serve teas in the yellow room.”

“Angel! I’ll love it!” Rosamund exclaimed.

Maidlin had been exploring upstairs. “You must have your room made nice, Ros. You’re still camping out in packing-cases,” she said reproachfully.

“I’ve been far too busy to care. All I’ve wanted has been my little bed, and Biddy’s blue pots for a touch of colour. I love them more every day.”

“Did you like my Camp Fire programme, Ros?” There was a wistful touch of shyness in Maidlin’s voice.

“Jolly fine. You go ahead with it. Do you really think green would be better for the back room, Maid, or would you have something brighter, like pink?”

“Not pink. You don’t really like pink,” Maidlin said gravely.

She allowed the subject to be changed, but tried once more as they were walking together to the car.

“Ros, what did you think about the Blue Birds? Ought we to take in little kids, or is it too much for the girls?”

Rosamund looked at her. “Maid, old dear, you must decide that. I don’t know the girls well enough. Joy, do send the twins here to tea one day! I’d love to see them under a green umbrella!”

“Ros doesn’t care about our things any more,” Maidlin broke out, as they drove away. “I tried to make her talk, but she always switched over to her own concerns. She’s growing away from us, just as we feared, Joy.”

“I don’t believe that; but she’s very full of her new life, of course. I hoped she’d tire of it and come back to us, but there seems no chance of that. It’s right that she should be keen, if she’s going to do it at all, Maidie.”

“I hoped she’d come for a night. Then I thought we’d talk as we used to do. But she says she can’t be spared just now. I don’t believe she means to come; she doesn’t care enough.”

“I hoped she’d come, too,” Joy agreed, and they drove home disappointed and in silence.

“What’s the matter, Ros?” Audrey glanced at Rosamund as she stood idly in the garden. “Did you want to go home with Lady Marchwood?”

Rosamund went to the scullery and tied on a rubber apron to protect her smock. “Not a scrap. Did you think their visit had unsettled me? I’m far too keen on the Rose and Squirrel. I shall choose wall-papers next week! Joy asked me to go for one night, but I think it’s wiser not.”

“It might be difficult to come away from that lovely place,” Elspeth said. “I’ll dry for you, Ros.”

“It isn’t that. I’d have loved to see it all again. But I think I won’t go just now.”

“I mustn’t see too much of Maid,” she said to herself, as she scoured a pan. “A night at the Hall wouldn’t affect me, but it would unsettle her! How I’d have loved it! But it’s better not. She’ll think me a brute, caring only about my own plans, but there’s no help for it. If I don’t encourage her, she’ll stop asking me and stand on her own feet.”

One joyful day in mid-September was spent in London, when Joy, Maidlin and Rosamund went from Regent Street to Tottenham Court Road, and then to Oxford Street, and chose curtains, china, and furniture. Camp Fire was not mentioned, to Rosamund’s relief, but she realised afterwards that there had been no time to think of anything but colours and designs and materials.

Maidlin, going home with Joy, said sadly, “I thought it was better not to try to make Ros talk about my affairs. We were so busy with hers that it was easy to keep away from Camp Fire.”

“It was her day,” Joy agreed. “How happy she was!”

“You’ve given her lovely things,” Maidlin remarked. “Jen’s kitchen stuff will be useful and so will Kenneth’s bath. But we’re giving her the beautiful things, Joy.”

“You have a big share in her pretties,” Joy said. “She’s in love with her curtains and her cups and saucers.”

Maidlin sighed. “I’ll give her anything I can. But what I want is to talk to her as we used to do. I feel she’s keeping me off whenever I’m with her.”

“Don’t go too often, for a while. Perhaps she’ll be more herself when she’s settled down.”

“She’s had three months. She’s farther away from us than she was at first,” Maidlin said drearily. “At first we talked as we used to do. But it was all about her house and her plans, and she’s quite ready to do that still. It’s when I want her to talk about my affairs that she shuts me up or changes the subject. She doesn’t care very much now.”

Rosamund’s house-warming party on the first of October brought all her friends to the Squirrel House.

“We must see the bath!” Jen said.

The double cottage looked very fresh in its new coat of whitewash. The Squirrel sign swung and creaked over the first door, the Rose hung over the other.

Rosamund’s big room, with deep yellow walls and brown curtains, yellow table-cloths and cushions, and the sketches and brown photos on the walls, was set for tea, and Maidlin’s gift of pretty creamy china with coloured patterns of fruit was in use for the first time.

“Ordinary visitors aren’t given these. They have plain yellow and green cups,” Rosamund explained. “You’re greatly honoured in being given oranges and cherries to drink from! We’re hoping to have parties in here, once we’re known; the Squirrel never had a big enough room for parties before.”

“It’s a beautiful room.” Joan and Mary, Jen and Joy wandered round and admired the pictures and the curtains.

Rosamund’s attic had walls of soft gray, with a narrow blue frieze, and deep blue curtains and bed-spread. The bed, wardrobe and dressing-table, which were Joy’s gift, were of light oak, and Mary’s cabinet of drawers was to match. The only ornaments were the bowls and vases and candlesticks of deep purple blue, and the blue basin and ewer, which Jen had given to Biddy five years before.

“It’s the room Biddy used to dream of,” Mary exclaimed. “She will be pleased, Rosamund!”

“You’ve changed all your plans, Ros!” Maidlin cried. “This room was to be white, and downstairs was to be cream!”

“Gray is softer than white, beside this blue,” Rosamund explained. “The blue shades into gray; look at this bowl!”

“And my—the other room? What have you done to it?” Maidlin ran to the back attic.

Rosamund noticed the catch in her breath, but made no comment. She followed with Jen into the little room, whose walls were pale green, with darker curtains.

“Pretty, Rosamunda! I do like your house. Now may we see the bath?” Jen pleaded.

Rosamund laughed, and led them to the kitchen.

“Jenny-Wren-Brownie, you and Ken have been far too good to me! My kitchen is gloriously stocked. I’m more than grateful. As for the Rose sign, I hope to thank the boys, when they’re old enough to understand. And Rosemary Jane’s blankets are the cosiest I’ve ever known.”

“Well, wasn’t it Rosemary Jane who introduced you to the Squirrel House?”

“In a way I suppose it was,” Rosamund admitted. “That tinkle means tea. Come and fit yourselves round my tables, and Elspeth and I will wait on you.”

“Won’t your elder aunt come too?”

“She must be ready, in case customers come. We’re open to the public, you know.”

“I propose the success of the Rose and Squirrel, and the health of all concerned!” Kenneth announced.

Rosamund, with heightened colour, jumped on to a chair. “And I’d just like to say, ‘Thank you ever so much, everybody, for all your kindness.’ Every single thing I have is a gift from one of you. No girl ever had such jolly friends before. Most of all, thank you for letting me have my own way. Some of you didn’t like it at the time, but I do want you to feel that I was right.”

“You look jolly well on it, anyway, Rosie,” said Joy.

“And that brown smock suits you, my child,” Jen added. “It’s exactly the shade of my May Queen robe, gold embroidery and all.”

Rosamund curtsied, holding up the beech-brown smock sewn in gold, which had arrived by post that morning. “I feel like an autumn leaf! I think I’ll dance a jig, because my house is finished and I love it so much.”

“Oh, go outside! You’re too big to dance in here!” Joan said laughing.

“Your roses will arrive in November, Rose-of-the-World,” Joy promised. “Elizabeth and Margaret have ordered the sorts you asked for.”

When the cars were ready to start for home, neither Maidlin nor Rosamund could be found. At the shouts of “Rose! Maid!” they came together from the back garden of the Rose House.

“We’ve been choosing places for the new roses,” Rosamund explained.

As Joy drove the big car home she heard Maidlin sigh. Quietly, so that Mary on the back seat did not hear, she asked, “Did you have any real talk with Rosamund, Maid?”

“I didn’t try. I thought it wasn’t fair. It was her day again, like the day in town, Joy. We talked about the roses and her cookery lessons. I didn’t bother her with my little worries; she thinks they are just little worries, and her affairs are really important. Don’t you think it was better?”

“For to-day, perhaps. It has been a big day for her. But she’s too much wrapped up in her own affairs. Why don’t you write to her?” Joy suggested. “She can’t ignore a letter.”

Maidlin’s face brightened. “I could do that. I’ll ask her what I should do about my slack Fire-Makers.”

“That’s what I should do,” Joy agreed. “She’ll have to answer a definite question. You could ask Jenny-Wren what she thinks, if you like, Maid.”

“She’s busy. She’ll be packing,” Maidlin said, for Jen was going with her children to the Grange, while painting and papering were being done at the Manor, and was expected to be away for some weeks. “There can’t be anything wrong about asking Ros a question, Joy. We won’t bother Jenny-Wren.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A DEEPENING SHADOW

“Does Ros give you good advice, Maid?” Joy looked up from her letters a week later. Maidlin laid down Rosamund’s letter. “She doesn’t say anything about the Camp Fire.” Joy put down the letter she had been reading “Doesn’t say anything? Did you ask her advice, as we planned?”

“Yes,” said Maidlin.

“And she’s taken no notice?”

“I think perhaps she didn’t read my letter.”

“Maid, what rubbish! What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t take any notice of the things I told her. Her letter’s all about their affairs. Ros’s father and stepmother are coming home in the spring; he isn’t well, and she isn’t very fit either. They plan to be home by February, so Ros wants to finish her cooking lessons by then. She’s sold that green silk scarf, and the blue table-runner and the mats, and she’d like some more woven goods from you; a dress-length and some scarves.”

Joy pursed her lips. “And she ignores your question?”

“Perhaps she’s forgotten. I shall ask her again,” Maidlin said, her tone one of quiet decision. “If she still takes no notice, I shan’t bother her any more.”

Joy looked at her. “I wonder if I ought to warn Ros? She’s making a big mistake.”

Maidlin turned quickly. “Joy! You can’t ask her to help me, if she doesn’t want to! It wouldn’t be the same. You can’t do anything, Joy. I must know whether Ros cares to help or not.”

Joy gave her another look. “I can’t believe Ros doesn’t care, Maid. You ought to trust her. She may be careless and carried away by her new interests, but at heart she cares about you, and us all, as much as ever.”

“I don’t think she does. She cares more about Audrey and Elspeth and their business now.”

“Are you jealous of Elspeth, Maid?”

“No, but I’m jealous of Rosamund’s shop, and her house, and all the new things,” Maidlin said heavily.

She wrote again, repeating her question about the Fire-Makers who were failing in their duty. For a week she waited for the answer, watching every post. When it came, she hid it before Joy had time to see it, and slipped away up to her own room.

“I couldn’t read it with Joy watching me! Has Ros stopped caring about us?” Breathless with anxiety, she dropped on her bed to read the letter.

“Maid! Maid, where are you?”

“Coming, Joy!” Maidlin devoured her letter, then tossed it into her desk and ran downstairs, only the strained look in her eyes and her tightened lips betraying her.

“Maid, here’s a letter from Jen, at the Grange. She asks Mary or me to go to her, for another week or two on the moors. Kenneth wants to go to friends in Scotland, but he won’t leave Jen alone with the children.”

“Of course. You must go, Joy. We’ll be all right. You’ll like a holiday with Jen.”

Maidlin hesitated, then added bravely, “I’ve a letter from Ros. She’s had such a jolly thing happen!”

“Oh? What’s that? What does she say about the Camp Fire trouble, Maid?”

“Only that I mustn’t ask her to help me now. I shan’t bother her again. The jolly thing is a letter from an invalid lady, who makes really good bags and pochettes in raffia. Ros has sold some for her, and she’s so grateful. Ros says it’s a lovely letter, but very touching. Isn’t it jolly for her, Joy? It’s what she hoped would happen; her shop has really been of use to somebody. First Jim, then this old lady!”

Joy looked at her anxiously. “I’m glad about that. But what about you and Ros, Maidie?”

“Oh, well! If Ros doesn’t care”—and then Maidlin’s composure broke down. She ran to Joy’s arms and cried heart-brokenly.

“Maidie, what can I do?” Joy asked helplessly. “Ros can’t understand how much you care! What is the silly idiot thinking about? Her own concerns, I suppose!”

Maidlin shook, and sobbed, and at last lay quietly, exhausted. “Joy!” she whispered.

“Yes, baby? How can I help? I’ll talk to Rosamund for you! But that won’t do any real good.”

“No, it wouldn’t help,” Maidlin whispered vehemently. “It’s our fault. We’ve been all wrong. Ros has gone away, and she can’t go on caring as she used to do. She has to care most about her new ideas. We’re back numbers; it’s just happened, and it isn’t fair to blame her. She can’t help it.”

“She ought to help it! After seven years, to forget in three months! I’ll tell her what I think of her!”

“Joy—no! Wait till you’ve been away; don’t write to her, or say anything. She hasn’t forgotten; it’s not that. But she feels she can’t take part in our affairs now; and of course she can’t. It’s not as if I really needed her help, Joy. I can do without her, as I did before. I was only trying to make her feel we needed her here. She doesn’t feel it, and she hasn’t time for us, so—well, it’s all right, isn’t it?”

“Do you feel it’s all right, Maid?”

Maidlin quivered. “I was a baby to cry. Yes, Joy, I do. Only I’m not used to the idea yet. Ros has grown away from us; it can’t be helped. You can’t pull her back, can you?”

“I can have a jolly good try!”

“If you do she’ll be mad, and we’ll have trouble. There isn’t any trouble just now,” Maidlin said bravely. “I don’t really need her to help me, so I don’t feel she’s let me down. She’s never dreamt I’d care. I won’t have her told, Joy. It will be all right, really.”

Joy gave her a curious look. Not for the first time she was conscious of a strange unyielding resolution in Maidlin, which might be strength but might also be obstinacy.

“I’m sorry for Rosamund,” Joy said gravely. “If she has convinced you that she doesn’t care about us as she used to do, I’m very sorry for her.”

“Oh, but she doesn’t. Anyone can see that,” the matter was tragically simple to Maidlin.

“What are you going to do, then, Maid? Am I not to write to her?”

“What would be the use of writing? She doesn’t understand. She thinks she cares about us as much as ever, but she can’t be bothered to give me advice. I can’t do anything. I shall write and say how awfully jolly it is about the old lady and the bags.”

Joy looked at her again. “And nothing more, Maid?”

“There’s nothing more to say. When I see her, I shall ask heaps of questions about her work and the shop. She’ll love that. I shan’t talk about the Camp Fire, because she always shuts me up. That will be the only difference.”

"If you can do that"—Joy began in relief. "I was afraid you were going to quarrel with Ros, Maidie."

"It would kill me to quarrel with her. I shan't be able to talk to her quite as I used to do," Maidlin said sadly, "because I'll have to be careful what I talk about. I'll have to remember which are the things she doesn't care to hear about. But there's plenty to talk about at the Squirrel House; all their affairs. We'll be quite good friends, Joy. There's nothing to worry about. You're not to tell Jen, Joy."

"My dear babe, I tell Jenny-Wren everything."

"Yes, but not this. It would be giving Ros away. Joy, it wouldn't be fair to her."

Joy looked doubtful. "Maid, I don't agree. Jen has the right to know all about us. We've never kept secrets from her."

"You can't tell her this," Maidlin insisted. "If you do, I'll never be able to go near Ros again."

"Dear kid, why not?"

"Because Jen would scold her, and Ros would think I was trying to make her give me more than she cares to do. If you tell Jen, Ros will come to explain, and she'll make me feel I'm a baby and we'll never be friends again. We'll have trouble that will be worse than Ros's going away has been."

"And you think you can avoid it by saying nothing?" Joy asked doubtfully.

"I can't see that there's anything to say, except to blame Ros, and that won't do any good. Don't tell Jen, Joy! She'd try to put things right, and it would only make them worse."

"I can't go and stay with Jen, and keep a big thing like this from her," Joy said decisively. "I shall send Mary."

"Oh, Joy! Will it spoil your holiday?"

"It would spoil it to be with Jen and have a secret from her. My dear kid, I don't want to go away from home. I'd rather be here with the babes, than anywhere. We'll stay at home quietly and send Mary-Dorothy to Yorkshire."

She said nothing to Mary of Maidlin's trouble. It was easy to keep out of letters what must have been told in ten minutes' talk with Jen. Mary went off to the Grange, rejoicing in the chance of a few more weeks among the moors she loved, with a half-finished manuscript in her suit-case, and Joy and Maidlin settled down to music and Guiding and the care of the twins.

Jen's stay in the north was extended into November, as the Manor was in the hands of decorators and the babies were better out of the way. Joy superintended the workmen and reported progress, and insisted that Mary should not hurry home. She watched Maidlin, and was glad she had not gone away and left Maidie with no one who understood. Maidlin said no more, and the matter seemed closed. But Joy did not feel sure the trouble was over.

"Hasn't Ros asked you to stay a night in her green room, Maid? You were to be her first visitor."

"Oh yes, she asked me some time ago, and she spoke about it again the other day. I said I couldn't leave home while Mary was away. It was true, Joy. I wouldn't go just now."

Joy noted that, 'It was true.' "But you'd have made some other excuse if that one hadn't been so easy. Didn't you want to go, Maid?"

"I couldn't. Not for a whole night, Joy. I can talk to Ros for an hour or two; it isn't difficult now. But I couldn't bear a night with her."

Joy turned and looked at her sharply. Once more she felt she did not understand her adopted daughter.

“Now, Maid! You ‘couldn’t bear’ a night with Ros? What do you mean? You said there wouldn’t be any trouble between you.”

“There isn’t,” Maidlin quivered. “We’re quite jolly and friendly.”

“Then why couldn’t you bear a night with her? You were looking forward to visiting the Squirrel House.”

“There’s no trouble, but there’s a difference,” Maidlin explained. “I don’t think Ros knows. She isn’t worried. But I feel I’m keeping things back, because I know she doesn’t care about them. I do care, and so—well, it isn’t comfortable. A little while’s all right, but if I went for the night, Ros would expect to sit on my bed and talk. And how can I, Joy?”

Joy pursed her lips. “Maid, are you sure you’re right about Rosamund? Each time I’ve gone lately I’ve taken the twins with me, and there’s been no chance to talk. Are you sure it isn’t all a misunderstanding? You say she wants to talk, and you can’t. What do you mean?”

“I can’t talk about the things that matter to me,” Maidlin’s voice was unsteady. “I tried to consult Ros and go on as before, and she choked me off. You know she did, Joy. I keep quiet about my plans and ideas now, that’s all.”

Joy gave her a steady look. “As soon as Jen comes home, I shall talk this over with her,” she said to herself. “Maid!” she said aloud. “Is Ros changed in any other way? Does she ask about the Camp Fire, for instance?”

“Sometimes.”

“Oh, she does! And what do you say?”

“Just that it’s all right and going well.”

“And that satisfies her?”

“I don’t know. I don’t look at her. I think she knows I feel sore about her letter. She’s different in other ways too, Joy. I said she’d miss the folk-dancing this winter, and she laughed and said, ‘Dancing! My dear infant, I have to work. Dancing’s all right for play, but I haven’t time for it.’”

“She’s working too hard. She ought to play sometimes.” Joy said no more, but thought much and anxiously about the matter.

“Maid doesn’t look at Rosamund when she speaks to her! Things aren’t all right, except on the surface. Maid’s feeling sore, and she won’t give Ros a chance to have the matter out. I wish I’d told Jen all about it!” she thought, as she took Elizabeth and Margaret for their morning drive. “I don’t think I can wait for Jen. It’s time something was done!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ROSAMUND'S POINT OF VIEW

Rosamund, in her blue smock, stood superintending the preparation of her rose bed. The new bushes would come in a week or two, so she had sent for a man to dig up the ground.

Audrey looked up from her baking and glanced through the window. "Elspeth, am I wrong, or is Ros not as happy as she was at first?"

Elspeth was polishing spoons and forks. "There's something the matter with her. She's as keen on the Rose and Squirrel as ever, and she's looking forward to the cookery course. But there's something wrong. She's quiet, and she sits and thinks."

"Is she missing her friends? They haven't been here so much lately."

"I think that's it. They're busy while Miss Devine's away, and they haven't time to come here. Maidlin came last week to see the trees, and Ros made me take her for a walk in the woods; didn't you notice? I thought it was so funny that Ros didn't go herself. She said she was on duty, and I must go. Maidlin loved the woods, but I thought she was disappointed."

"That was odd of Rosamund. Can't you make her tell you what's wrong?"

"She wouldn't tell me. You might be able to make her talk."

"Look at her now!" said Audrey.

Rosamund was standing gazing up at the Rose sign over her porch, with very wistful eyes. She shrugged her shoulders, and sighed, and took up a spade and began to dig.

"Something's wrong. I wonder—what now?" and Audrey went to the window to look, as Rosamund dropped her spade and came through to the garden of the Squirrel House.

"It's Lady Marchwood and the twins. Warm some milk for them, Elspeth!" and Audrey prepared morning coffee and cakes for Joy.

"Nice to see you, Joy!" Rosamund met the party at the gate. "Isn't Maid with you?"

"Maid's busy at the Manor. Jen and the family come home to-night, and Maidie's helping with the flowers and the finishing touches," Joy lifted little Margaret from the car. "Run up the path and find a golden umbrella, Elizabeth!"

"They look like two chestnut leaves blowing before the wind," Rosamund said with a laugh, as the twins, in short yellow silk smocks and bare red heads, danced up the path to the courtyard. "Two gold fairies this time!"

She lifted them into chairs and brought milk and biscuits.

"Tony comin' home, Aunty," Elizabeth cried.

"Andy, too, and Baby. And Aunty Jen and Aunty Mary and Uncle Ken! Such a lot of peoples comin' home," Margaret sang jubilantly.

"Goin' to have a party for Tony!" Elizabeth was full of information and importance.

"And for Andy, and for Baby, and for Janny, and for John, in ve sandpit, Aunty Rose!"

"That will be a big party. Here's Audrey bringing your coffee, Joy. I want some more goods from Whiteways; we sell the pottery constantly, and a little weaving too."

"I want to talk to you. Could Elspeth mind the babes for a few minutes?"

Rosamund looked startled. "Certainly. Is anything the matter?"

"Where can we go? Into the other house?" Joy asked, drinking her coffee.

Rosamund knit her brows at the tone in which she spoke. "Yes, please do come in. We shan't be overheard there, if that's what you mean."

She called Elspeth to watch the twins, and led Joy through the courtyard and the gap in the wall to the Rose House.

The big front room was kept ready for guests, and for the winter months the room in the Squirrel House was used by all three girls as a sitting-room and workroom and was not needed for customers. Rosamund's handicraft stall in the corner attracted much attention, and visitors liked to wander round and look at the paintings and photographs, while waiting for their tea.

Rosamund went to her table and stood fingering a leather bag. "Quite a lot has sold since you were here.—Yes, Joy? What is it?"

"What are you playing at with Maidie?" Joy's pent-up indignation broke out. "Don't you know you're breaking her heart? She can't stand much more."

Rosamund raised her head with a jerk and stared at her. "Joy, what do you mean? Maid has hurt me horribly. She keeps me at a distance. I can't break down the wall between us; I've tried my hardest. Maid's surface-friendly, but there's nothing underneath, no friendship. She won't tell me anything. She won't come here to stay. She talks on and on about my affairs, but I can't drag a word out of her about herself. And then you say I——! What do you mean, Joy?"

Joy stood staring back at her. "Maid's desperately unhappy. She's convinced you don't want to hear about her doings. It has hurt her to her soul. She can't talk about it because she cares so much.—What is the matter with you both?"

Rosamund stood playing with the leather fringe and looking down at the table. "I can't do any more. I've been feeling just sick;—and desperately lonely. Maid has you and the children, and Mary and Jen. I'm all alone. I haven't known what to do. I've tried—I can't do anything with her"—she fled through the kitchen and up to her blue room.

Joy heard the door close. She started to follow, then checked herself. "I don't seem to have done much good so far! This is too difficult for me. If Ros has collapsed she won't let me in. Are they just silly children, or is it serious?"

She went slowly up to Rosamund's door. "Rosie, let me in. I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry; I had no idea you were feeling sore too."

Rosamund answered unsteadily. "Please go away! I can't talk just now. I don't understand; I can't—" her voice broke. "Go away, Joy!"

The door remained closed. Joy heard her crying within. She turned and ran downstairs, and into the Squirrel House.

"I've said something that has upset Rosamund and she won't see me again; she's in her room. Will you comfort her, when she's ready for it?" she said breathlessly to Audrey.

Audrey turned from the oven door, hot and flushed. "I can't comfort Rosamund, Lady Marchwood. She won't tell me anything. We'll be very good to her, but that will be all she'll allow. I'm sorry. She hasn't seemed happy lately."

"She hasn't told you anything about it?"

"No, and she won't," Audrey said definitely. "If it is some trouble connected with you she won't explain to us. I've thought she was lonely for some time."

"I can't do any more just now," Joy said unhappily. "It's some misunderstanding between her and Maidlin. I'm afraid it has been going on for some time, and I haven't realised Rosamund's side of it. I knew Maidlin was unhappy, and I blamed Ros. She blames Maidlin." She looked at Audrey. "It's desperately tragic. They're everything to one another. They're both breaking their hearts."

“It should be possible to put it right. I know how Ros cares for Maidlin. Can’t you trace the trouble?”

“Ros was careless, and Maid resented it. That’s all I can see. We’ll have to think it over and try to help them. Don’t talk to Rosamund about it, or tell her I’ve told you, please.”

“I shouldn’t think of it,” Audrey retorted sharply. “I know better than to try to force her confidence.”

Joy was too unhappy to resent the reproof. “I know you’ll be good to her. I don’t know whether I’ve helped or not. At least I know how Ros feels now. The next thing to do is to tell Jen,” and she went gravely away to fetch the twins.

Audrey was ironing, an hour later, when Rosamund spoke from the doorway. “Audrey, I want to go out. Do you need me?”

“Not a scrap,” Audrey did not look up. “Take a long day off. You haven’t had a holiday for weeks. We’ll look after your shop. Have you made sandwiches?”

“No, but I’ve bagged some apples and some stale buns. I’ll go to a cottage for tea, if I want it.”

“Oh, take fresh buns!” Audrey called after her. “And come home for tea! Don’t patronise an opposition shop!”

Rosamund laughed and waved her stick, and went off through the garden into the woods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JEN'S POINT OF VIEW

"Joy, what's the matter with Maidlin?"

"You've seen it, then. It hasn't taken you long," Joy said. "Has she told you anything, Jenny-Wren?"

The boys and Rosemary Jane had been fed and put to bed, tired after their long drive. Joy and Maidlin had stayed to dinner with Jen and Kenneth, while Mary unpacked at the Hall. Jen's eyes had been often on Maidlin, and Joy had seen it.

Kenneth had escorted the whole party back to the Hall, carrying torches to show their path through the shrubbery; he would not allow anyone to go alone across the park at night during the winter months. Leaving him downstairs with Maidlin, Joy and Jen had gone up to the nursery for a glimpse of the sleeping twins, and it was as they stood by the two little beds that Jen put her question.

"Maidlin hasn't told me anything. She's unhappy; anyone can see that. Her eyes have the dreamy faraway look that means she's living in a world of her own, and from her face I should say it's an unhappy world just now. What have you been doing to her?"

"It's Rosamund. I wish you'd been at home. It might not have happened," Joy said restlessly. "That's a confession of failure on my part, but I feel helpless. I've tried to help, but it hasn't been much good."

"Rosamund? What do you mean?" Jen demanded. "Those two can't have quarrelled, after all these years? They couldn't do it, Joy! I asked Maidlin about Ros, and she said she was all right."

"Not quarrelled, but drifted apart. Maid tried to consult Ros about Camp Fire business, in the hope of convincing Ros that we still needed her here. It was Maidie's own idea, but it seemed to me quite wise."

Jen knit her brows. "I'm not so sure. We'd all been telling Ros it wasn't good for Maidlin to depend on her so much. Perhaps she thought it was a chance to make Maid more self-reliant. Well? Did Ros refuse to advise her?"

"First she ignored the letter. Then she refused to help."

"What did Maidlin say?"

"She was heartbroken," Joy said soberly. "She felt it meant that Rosamund didn't care about us as she used to do."

"Rubbish! Rot! You didn't let her believe that?"

"I felt much as she did, that Ros was absorbed in her new plans and it was no use bothering her."

"And that was the end of it! For you, perhaps. But Maidlin isn't a practical matter-of-fact person; it didn't end it for her. What happened?" Jen sounded irritated. "Maid shut up inside herself, I suppose, and brooded over her misery. I understand her look now!"

"I've been unhappy myself," Joy urged. "I felt we had lost Ros. It's natural she should be keen on her new life."

"It's a blessing that she is keen. Poor kid, she's had her life shattered, all in a moment, and she's making the pluckiest attempt to build up a new one. It's only possible if we all back her up. If you and Maid have gone off the deep end over your own feelings, it's jolly hard on

Rosamund. Well, what happened? Tell me the worst! Maidlin has gone mooning about saying Ros had forgotten her. Ros probably refused to be consulted at every turn, for Maid's own good. What did you do about it?"

Joy was too much crushed by this new view of the case to make any excuse. "I went and rowed her this morning, for Maidie's sake."

"You didn't? Joy, you didn't? Oh, you brute!"

"I honestly felt Ros had been unkind to Maid," Joy retorted. "And if there's one thing I can't stand it's seeing Maidie miserable. She's been unhappy for weeks, and it was Rosamund's fault. I stood it as long as I could, in the hope that you'd put things right for us. But this morning I went to see Rosamund, thinking perhaps Maidlin was wrong; and I suppose I said too much. I didn't really row her, Jen, but she turned on me and said Maid was unfriendly and she was lonely, and she didn't know what to do, and then she ran away upstairs and I couldn't make her come down again. I couldn't do any more."

"You'd done enough. It's fearfully hard on Rosamund," Jen said indignantly.

"It's been fearfully hard on Maidlin," Joy pleaded. "She worships Ros. But Ros has made her feel that although they were quite friendly there was to be no discussion of the things that matter to Maid. The girls haven't quarrelled; Maidlin goes to see Ros, and they talk and are quite pleasant; but it has to be all about Rosamund's affairs."

Jen was listening intently. "You say, 'It has to be.' Is that because Ros won't listen or because Maidlin won't talk?"

"Because Ros has refused to help Maidlin. And yet this morning Ros said she couldn't drag a word out of Maid about herself. That was too much for me. I felt helpless," Joy confessed. "I know how it's hurting Maidie not to talk properly to Rosamund. I just didn't know what to say, Jen."

Jen drew up the blanket Margaret had kicked aside and covered the sturdy little limbs with gentle hands.

"Poor Rosamund! The trouble lies in Maidlin's difficult nature, Joy. Don't you understand her yet? I see what happened. Ros felt Maid was depending on her unnaturally, and she was right. She tried to push the door between them a little less widely open, for Maidlin's sake. Perhaps she did it clumsily; she's very young to have to tackle such a problem, and she had no one to help her. Remember how much alone she must have felt, after so many years with us all around her! She wouldn't confide in the Squirrel girls; she had to decide for herself. She closed the door a little, by refusing to run the Camp Fire for Maidlin. Maid took fright and felt everything was at an end. And she closed the door firmly and locked it; shut Ros out of her confidence for ever, by saying to herself that Ros didn't care any longer. Absurd and exaggerated, no doubt, but Maidie's an artist who hasn't learned how to manage her feelings yet. She's been honestly heartbroken by Rosamund's forgetfulness, which has seemed obvious to her. And poor Ros, all alone and unable to talk it over with anybody, has been bewildered and lonely and intensely unhappy. Then you try to lend a hand by going and scolding her. No wonder she broke down!"

Joy was bending over Elizabeth, smoothing the ruddy curls on the pillow. She put her head down on the rail of the cot.

"Jen, next to these two and you, I love Ros and Maidie. I haven't understood, but I feel you're right. I didn't really believe Ros had stopped caring about us; I felt Maid must be wrong, but I couldn't see how. Can we help them? Can you? I'm no good. I only make matters worse."

Jen put her arm round her, her indignation gone. “Dear, we’ll pull them through somehow. It was too difficult for you, and I don’t wonder. It’s because they’re both such fine girls, Joy; so well worth while! If Ros was soft, she’d have let Maidlin go on. If Maid was a usual conventional sort of person, she’d have laughed and thought no more about it. It’s because she’s Maidie that she has been so much cut up. We’ve always known she was difficult. But you wouldn’t have her different, Joy!”

“I’m not wise enough to be taking care of her.”

“Bosh!” Jen said breezily. “You can do for her what no one else can do. If Maid worships Ros, she adores you. Now tell me—does she know you tackled Rosamund to-day?”

“No, I couldn’t tell her. I’d made a mess of it. She’d only have hated me.”

“Don’t tell her. I shall see Rosamund to-morrow. Oh yes!” as Joy began a protest. “This mess isn’t going on. Ros is going to understand quite clearly what it’s all about. I believe we can trust her and Maidlin, once they understand. But we’ll tackle Ros first, for she is sensible! I’m very fond of Maidie, but I’ve no opinion at all of her common sense!”

Joy looked up. “Jen, why are you so much wiser than the rest of us?”

Jen stared at her. “Wise? I? My dear, I’m not. I sometimes make a good guess as to what’s the matter with people, but I’m not wise. I may be all wrong about Ros and Maid.”

“I feel you’re right. I’d have seen it for myself if I’d thought of it. It isn’t guessing, Brownie; you know, in some queer way. Mary-Dorothy calls it intuition. Why haven’t I any of it?”

Jen looked thoughtful. “It isn’t anything mysterious,” she said at last. “I trust people more than you do, ‘Traveller’s Joy’. I trust the good in them. I knew that if Ros seemed careless or forgetful, there was some other explanation. So I rooted round and found one.”

Joy sighed. “I didn’t trust her quite enough. I was puzzled; it wasn’t like her and I couldn’t believe it. But I didn’t go so far as to insist on finding another way out.”

“If Ros had trusted Maidlin completely, this wouldn’t have happened,” Jen was following out her own thought. “She’d have been sure the good in Maid would keep her from relying too long on anyone else, and so she’d have had the courage to go on helping her. She was afraid Maidie had no backbone, and so she tried to force her to develop one. It can’t be done. That’s where Ros went wrong. I’ll try to make her see it.”

“It isn’t easy to make Ros see anything. She’s so very sure of herself, especially now.”

“I believe she’ll see it. I believe in trusting people to be better than we think they are.”

“There you go again!” Joy sighed. “You’re going to trust Rosamund to understand. I couldn’t.”

Jen kissed her. “Don’t worry, old dear. Call me in, and I’ll do the trusting for you. I’ll take the risks. People generally rise to the occasion when you give them the chance.—How well the twins are looking!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JEN AT THE SQUIRREL HOUSE

“Did Rosamund feel better for her walk, Audrey?” Elspeth asked wistfully, as she tidied the sitting-room next morning.

“I didn’t ask her. I fancy she made up her mind about the trouble, whatever it was.”

“She isn’t singing this morning. But she hasn’t sung as much lately as she did at first.”

“She isn’t as happy as she was. But she isn’t bored; it’s not that. There’s been some home trouble, and Lady Marchwood’s visit brought it to a head,” Audrey said.

“It was hateful of her!”

“I don’t think so. It’s better the thing should come out. Rosamund was unhappy, but she didn’t seem able to do anything. Now perhaps she may make up her mind.”

“I wish we knew what it’s all about!”

Audrey said nothing. Elspeth’s friendship with Maidlin need not be marred.

Rosamund came in from the Rose House. “Audrey, could you do without me for one night? I’d like to go off this afternoon.”

“Quite all right,” Audrey said cheerfully. “You ought to have had a night off long ago. Go as early as you like.”

Rosamund was grateful that no questions had been asked. She explained as much as she could. “I’ve a craving to see the Abbey again. The beeches are always wonderful in the autumn, as fine as our woods here. I shall ring up Joy from London. She made me promise never to go to the Manor unless I’d asked first if they could have me at the Hall. So I must ask Joy, though I think she may feel it’s better for me to go to Jen.”

Audrey made no comment, but asked, “How will you go?”

“Train to town, tube to Paddington, train to Risborough, unless Joy sends the car to meet me.”

“She’d send it here to fetch you,” Elspeth exclaimed.

“That’s why I shall only ring her up from Paddington. I’m not going to ask for the car. I shall say I’m coming, whether they want me or not.”

“Aren’t you sure they’ll want you?” Audrey asked gravely. “There isn’t any doubt of it, is there, Ros?”

“I’m not sure. Joy may think it’s wiser not. The thing I am sure of is that I’m going.”

And Rosamund went about her morning work looking sober but resolute.

“She’s going to do something about the trouble, whatever it is,” Elspeth whispered.

Audrey agreed. “She’s decided. I hope she’ll be happier when she comes back.”

Rosamund was packing her suit-case, later in the morning, meaning to start after an early lunch, when Elspeth called excitedly from the courtyard.

“Rosamund! Here’s Lady Marchwood!—the other one!”

“It’s only Jenny-Wren, Ros. May I come up?” Jen stood below the window.

Rosamund leaned over the sill. “Brownie, why have you come? I was coming to see you. I’m packing.”

“Romeo and Juliet,” said Elspeth.

Jen laughed. “Romeo’s going up, if he has to climb up the clematis. Cheers, Rosie! I rather thought you’d be coming home. I’ve come to fetch you in the Rover. But I’ll have lunch with

you and your aunts. Break it to Audrey that I want something to eat, Elspeth! Eggs will do,” and she crossed the big room to the kitchen and came up the narrow stair.

Rosamund stood beside a half-filled suit-case, still in her blue smock. “Jen, why have you come? To scold me, or because you understand?”

Jen closed the door. “Both, my dear. But first and most important, to sympathise. Rosie, you’ve had a rotten time. I wish I’d been at home.”

“Oh!” Rosamund gasped. “You do see, then! You know what it has meant to me? Joy can only see Maid’s side of it.”

Jen sat on the blue bed and held out her arms. Rosamund dropped on her knees beside her and hid her face. “Jen, I’m a baby. But I’ve been so lonely,—and they didn’t come. They knew I couldn’t go to them. They said they were busy, because Mary was away. I’ve been so worried, and there was no one to ask.” The words came jerkily, between her sobs.

Jen held her tightly. “As bad as that, Rosie dear? I guessed you were wanting my shoulder to weep on. But I didn’t know it was quite so bad.”

“I am an infant!” Rosamund struggled for self-control. “I’ll be all right in a moment. You shouldn’t have been nice to me. If you’d rowed me, I’d have been sensible. But to find somebody who understood was just too much.”

Jen laughed. “You poor kid! You have felt forsaken. Ros, it’s all a mistake between you and Maidlin. Joy’s in tears about you. Yes, she is. I wish you’d seen her again yesterday. I know you couldn’t, but you’d have felt happier if you’d let her say she was sorry. She’s frightfully cut up, and feels she’s made a real mess of things. She confessed to me last night, and honestly, she almost cried over you and Maidlin. You come next to the twins with her. She’s been bewildered and heartbroken over this trouble.”

“She thinks it’s my fault.”

“Well, so it is,” Jen said cheerfully. “When you understand you’ll put it right.”

Rosamund stiffened in her arms. “You think it was my fault too?”

“What were you coming to see us for, Rosie?”

“To tell Maid I was sorry. Joy said I’d hurt Maidie and made her feel I didn’t want her to talk. I never meant that. I was going to say I was sorry. But Maid has misunderstood me, Jen.”

“But you were going to take the first step? That was jolly sporting of you, my dear.”

“One must, with Maid. She never will,” Rosamund said unsteadily. “I’ll wait for ever if I wait for Maid. If it’s all been a mistake, I must try to put it right. But I don’t see how it happened. I’ve thought till I’m tired. I couldn’t run the Camp Fire for Maid, and she was consulting me at every step, Jen. You all said she ought not to rely on me.”

“That’s the part that was so very hard on you, and the part you need to understand,” Jen said firmly. “Ros, Maidie was so cut up at your wanting to go away and make a new life for yourself, that she hit on the idea of trying to make you feel how much she needed you. You had said you weren’t needed. Maid thought perhaps, if you felt she did need you, you might come home again.”

Rosamund looked up at her, reddening in surprise. “Was that why she began asking me about the Camp Fire?”

“Just that, my dear. Considering how we had all been saying she shouldn’t lean on you so much, it wasn’t very wise, and it was very hard on you. If I’d known, I should have felt inclined to give you a hint.”

“Then she wasn’t relying on me, really?”

“She thinks she wasn’t,” Jen corrected. “But you know what Maidie is. If she can make anyone else act for her she does it. It was a dangerous game, Maidlin being what she is.”

“If I’d understood I’d have taken less notice,” Rosamund thought the matter out. “I’d have helped her a little, so that she wouldn’t be hurt. I felt I had to stop her, Jen. I suppose I said too much. I’ll say I’m sorry.”

Jen put her arms round her again. “Wait a moment, Ros dear. You’re going to Maidlin with the thought that she has been childish and silly. She’ll feel it, and she may not make friends again. It isn’t as if you had really quarrelled. What you want is to give Maidlin back her confidence in you. Just now it’s shattered by your refusal to help her, and though she is pleasant enough when she meets you, there’s a wall of reserve you can’t break down.”

“I know. I’ve been feeling it,” Rosamund knelt with bent head. “Won’t I break through if I tell her I’m sorry, Jen?”

“Not if your feeling is that she has been the only one in the wrong.”

Rosamund looked up quickly. “Then I was wrong too? Explain to me, Jen. If I was wrong I don’t mind saying so. But I can’t say it unless I feel it. I was only going to tell Maid I was sorry. That’s different.”

“The question is—and it’s a very hard question to answer—has anyone the right to refuse help to somebody who has asked it?” Jen said soberly. “You refused to help Maidlin, believing she was in earnest.”

“For her good!” Rosamund exclaimed. “I felt it was bad for her to be helped, Jen.”

“But had you the right to play Providence like that?” Jen suggested.

Rosamund stared at her. “I had to decide what I ought to do.”

“I know. And you decided as you thought right, though it cost you something, didn’t it?”

“It cost me a good deal,” Rosamund said unsteadily. “When I found it had lost me Maid’s friendship I didn’t know what to do. She doesn’t trust me now. I’ve been sick to the heart for weeks. But I did think it would be wrong to go on helping her.”

“You felt it was your duty to force her to be more grown-up and self-reliant?”

“Yes! Yes, I did, Jen.”

“I don’t say you were wrong. It’s a very difficult position. But for myself I couldn’t do it,” Jen said definitely.

“Oh!” Rosamund stared at her again. At last she said, “What would you do, then? You’re generally right, Brownie. Would you go on helping people for ever?”

“As long as they seemed to need it. I’d trust them to grow up some day; but I wouldn’t force them. Some people grow very slowly. Mary always says one part of her didn’t even begin to grow till after she was thirty. And Maidlin is like Mary, in many ways. They both go inside themselves and shut out the rest of the world.”

“Elspeth’s another,” Rosamund interrupted. “Elspeth’s rather a problem to me. She’ll do any mortal thing I suggest, and she looks at me with eyes like a big dog’s. I’m rather glad I’m going to London for a while.”

“Yes, your Aunt Elspeth is the same sort. You’re so different that I’ve no doubt she worships the ground you tread on. Do you see what you did to Maidlin, Ros?”

“Tried to make her grow up before she was ready for it, do you mean?”

“Tried to force her development, instead of allowing it to happen naturally,” Jen said bluntly.

“Oh!” Rosamund said again, and stared at her once more. “You think I should have waited, and gone on helping her, and believed that in time she’d come through?”

“She had come through, if you’d only known. She’s quite able to run the Camp Fire alone; she’d done it for a year. What you have done, by refusing, is to close her up against you. Her friendship with you has been the thing that has helped her most in all her life, ever since the first moment you met. You and Joy; and you’ve taken yourself out of her life. I may be wrong, but it seems to me you’ve done far more harm, by closing that door between you, than by any help you were giving Maidlin.”

Rosamund looked at her in horror. “You mean—I may have done Maid real harm—by making her shut up against me?”

“What do you think yourself?” Jen’s arm tightened round her. “I know how you’ve cared for Maidie all these years.”

Rosamund looked up, her eyes frightened. “How soon can we start? Jen, I never meant to do Maid harm!”

Jen laughed. “Now don’t turn nervy! You’ve had too much to put up with these last few weeks, you poor kid. Maid won’t run away, or go off her head, before this evening. You’ll be there by tea-time. Maid’s pulling through rather well; she hasn’t gone to pieces, or anything like that. But she has been dreaming again; I questioned her this morning in the Abbey, and she confessed that she’d had that dream of big things and little things and sudden changes; you remember?”

“She hasn’t had it for years,” Rosamund said unsteadily. “It always means there’s something wrong. Jen, I didn’t realise. I never meant to do Maid harm.”

“I feel you should have been more careful, knowing Maidlin as you do,” Jen said gently. “Your argument may have been sound enough—that it was unwise to go on helping her; though, as I’ve said, I doubt it. But in this case, with Maidie’s temperament, you took big risks. Ros, Maidlin isn’t settled into her real self yet. You surely know that? She’s still growing and developing, very slowly; incredibly slowly, as it seems to you and me. She needs all the help we can give her.”

“But you all told me she shouldn’t lean on me so much, and it was good for her when I went away!” Rosamund cried.

Jen laughed. “It’s true. But we never meant you to fling her off entirely and leave her struggling in an empty world, which is what it must have seemed to her.”

“I never meant that,” Rosamund said brokenly. “I want to tell her I was wrong, Jen. I can’t rest till I’ve told her. I shall know at once if it’s going to put things right.”

“You mustn’t expect everything all at once,” Jen warned her, very gently. “Maid has had an ugly shock, and in self-defence she has closed all her doors against you. I believe she’ll open them again, but not all at once. You’ll need patience. You may have to wait for her.”

“I’ll wait for years, if only I don’t feel I’m up against that wall.”

“Maid will be shy at first. But she’s so very fond of you that I believe you’ll win her back.”

“I asked her to come and stay. I’ve never had a visitor. I did hope she’d come before I went to London.”

“She couldn’t, you know. She couldn’t have borne it, Rosamunda.”

Rosamund quivered. “Did I hurt her so badly? Jen, I feel very small. I’ve failed so horribly with Maid, and done harm when I meant to help. And I was so pleased with myself! I thought everything had gone so well. I feel a worm.”

Jen laughed in sympathy. “It wouldn’t be good for us if everything we did turned out well. You’re very sure of yourself, Rosie.”

“I’ll never be sure of myself again!” and Rosamund sprang up to tidy her hair as the bell tinkled below. “Don’t say anything to Audrey, Jen. I haven’t told her.”

“I shall babble about the Yorkshire moors,” Jen promised. “How pretty your blue room is! Bidy will be pleased, when she sees it!”

“It isn’t really blue,” Rosamund seized on the new subject eagerly. “It’s purple-blue. Wait till you see wild hyacinths in it in the spring!—I say, Jen! My father’s really very seedy. I’m worried about him.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Rosie. Is he coming home soon?”

“Early spring, they think. I’m sorry for Eleanor. We don’t call her Beautiful Girl now! She didn’t marry him expecting to need to nurse him; she was out for a good time, and excitement. He’s been seedy off and on ever since, and she isn’t very fit herself. She needs looking after, but she’s having to look after him instead.”

Jen looked grave. “That’s trying for them both. I hope there isn’t more trouble ahead of you, Ros.”

“I don’t know what will happen when they come home. To be honest, I’m dreading it,” Rosamund said, as they went down to lunch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE IN THE ABBEY

As Jen drove the Rover homewards she turned to Rosamund. "How's the shop, Rosie? I've not heard anything about it yet."

"The shop's ripping. I've sold lots of stuff. Jim's models are always in demand. His mother says he hasn't been so happy since his accident."

"That's very jolly. You must feel bucked! I want some more creatures for the boys. They loved the first set, but the wee things have been lost in the garden or dropped into cracks."

"I've something you'll like better than wooden pigs. I forgot to show you; I was thinking so much about Maid," Rosamund said. "I've found a jolly woman, who paints little sketches of the woods, Jen. She isn't young, and she's shy and alone; a sort of Mary-Dorothy, shut up in herself and full of artistic feeling, and needing some kind of expression. I was out walking one day; I must have exercise, and I do feel being shut up in one place, even if it's a jolly garden! We used to go out so much. A thunderstorm came on, and I ran into a lonely house to shelter. And here was this nice shy woman, with a room full of really jolly sketches, and no one even to look at them. I made her talk, and she said she loved doing them but it seemed no good, as she made no use of them afterwards. I offered to show them for her, and she said if she sold any she'd use the money for East End children's holidays. I've sold three already, and she's hard at work and as happy as a chaffinch in an orchard."

"And the kiddies in Poplar and Bow will go into the country and to the sea. Ros, what a splendid bit of work! The Sign of the Rose is justifying you more quickly than we expected. Don't you feel very happy?"

"About that—and Jim—and the old pochette lady; yes, I'm happy about all that."

Jen glanced at her sober face. "Do you find it very hard to stick to work sometimes?"

"Rather! I don't grouse about being tired. On the whole I like it; it feels independent and worth while to work till one's tired. But it is jolly hard to stick to it day after day, when the air's crisp and autumny and I want to go off for a holiday! The woods and the hills make me nearly ill, because they draw me so strongly and I can't leave everything and go off."

"But you could!" Jen argued. "Audrey wouldn't mind."

"Audrey wouldn't mind, but I should. I must stick to my job. And Elspeth would want to come too, or to go off on her own. We're training her to business ways. If she saw me being slack, it would be horribly bad for her. The other day Audrey thanked me for the way I'd stuck to the shop," Rosamund said quietly. "I was really touched, Brownie. She said she'd been afraid that I'd be easy-going and want to take days off; and she'd been worried because it would have been such a bad example for Elspeth. Audrey thought as I hadn't been used to a business life I might not settle down."

"And she found you did, and that Aunt Elspeth copied you. That was rather nice, Rosie."

"I learnt to do things properly from you and Joy and Mary. We've never been allowed to be slack, though we've had everything we wanted. If I'm helping Audrey decently, it's owing to all you Abbey folk," Rosamund said. "But that doesn't mean that I don't want to go off into the woods every fine morning, Brownie."

Jen laughed. "My dear, I know. Don't you suppose I'd rather sit by the lake with the boys than go to a stuffy bazaar? But we have our jobs and we do them. Mary-Dorothy doesn't go in

the woods when proofs are waiting, and Maid doesn't shirk her French and Italian prep."

"It's all the same," Rosamund agreed. "Bazaars for you, Brownie; prep and practising for Maid, washing cups and dusting the shop for me. I wonder sometimes if Joy was right in what she said about wasting one's education."

"And then you remember Jim, and the old lady, and the painting person, and the East End kiddies. And you know she wasn't right."

"She would be right if there was nothing in it but cups and dusting. But the other side—yes, it is worth it, Brownie."

"It's probably worth it for Elspeth's sake too."

"Perhaps. I'm satisfied, Jenny-Wren, and quite happy—except about Maid and Joy. But I have been lonely," and Rosamund sat silent and thoughtful.

"Then if you found somebody was looking up to you enormously, and copying you, and relying on you, you'd let her go on, Jenny-Wren?" she asked at last.

"It's a real difficulty," Jen said gravely. "For myself, I should feel it was a responsibility which I couldn't shirk. To stop her suddenly would be shirking; I'd be afraid I was really doing it because I couldn't be bothered with her, and only persuading myself it was for her sake."

"What a horrible idea!" Rosamund said indignantly. "It wasn't that with me and Maid. Except that I knew I couldn't go on helping her, now that I've left home. It would have been too difficult," she added.

Jen did not press the point. "I feel that if people show signs of that sort of hero-worship for you, it's because you have something to give them; some strength where their nature is weak. To refuse to give it would be a real responsibility; I couldn't do it myself. I should feel it meant I ought to be a sort of elder sister, and help and lead the younger one, ever so gently, till she was able to stand by herself. But to refuse the help—no! If her nature was demanding help from mine, I'd feel I had to give it."

"But suppose you didn't feel good enough, Brownie? Suppose you hadn't the help to give?"

"She wouldn't ask it unless I had it. The fact that she felt drawn to me for help would be the proof that I had it. I'd find it somewhere inside myself."

"Yes, at first. But suppose she hung on, and you felt you'd given her all you had to give?" Rosamund insisted. "I'm thinking of Elspeth as much as Maid. You should see the way she looks at me!"

"I did see. It's a responsibility that will come to you often, Ros, because you're so self-confident and capable. People who are doubtful of themselves will always turn to you."

"Well, what am I to do? Who's to help me? I can't go on giving out for ever?"

"No, of course not—unless you're taking in too. You'll have to find help for yourself; and if you're wise you won't be easily satisfied. You won't be content with help from people like me, for instance. You'll go beyond that, Rosie. There's only one help that is really worth while."

"Oh! . . . I see. Thank you, Jenny-Wren."

And Rosamund lapsed into deep thought again.

As the car crossed the village green of Whiteways Rosamund roused herself. "Put me down at the Abbey, Brownie. Could you send Maid there without telling her why?"

"I'll try," Jen stopped the car, and Rosamund vaulted over the railing and went soberly towards the ruins. As she reached the cloister garth she paused, for Maidlin was sitting on the

lowest step of the refectory stair. Before Rosamund could draw back, she rose, gazing with wild eyes.

“Ros! You’re not real! You—”

Then Rosamund was beside her, her eyes anxious.

“Maid, don’t be a goat! Of course I’m real; feel that! Jenny-Wren came to lunch at the Squirrel, and I came back in the Rover.”

“Oh! I thought you were a ghost, or I was seeing things!” Maidlin said dazedly.

“Maid, I’ve made an awful ass of myself!” Rosamund burst out. “I’ve come to say I’m sorry. You’ve nearly killed me, these last few weeks.”

Maidlin stared at her blankly. “I? You? I don’t understand.”

“I can’t tell you,” Rosamund said unsteadily. “It’s been the limit. Then Joy came—and then Jen—and now—I can’t—”

The strain was telling on her. She sat down on the step and buried her face on her knees.

Maidlin stared down at her with frightened eyes. Then, as Rosamund’s shoulders began to shake, she fell on her knees beside her.

“Ros! Ros! I don’t understand. Oh, Ros, please don’t!”

“I’ve been a brute to you, and I never meant it,” Rosamund whispered. “I did what I thought was right. It hurt me horribly. Maid, I apologise. I’m frightfully ashamed of myself for being such a silly ass.”

“Ros, you weren’t!” Maidlin cried.

“I’ve been aching for you to tell me things. It’s hurt me every time you’ve shut up and talked of something else. I couldn’t—”

“But I thought you didn’t care,” Maidlin faltered.

“That’s where I was such a silly ass—to make you think that. Sometimes I’ve nearly cried when you’ve gone home. You can’t think how lonely I’ve been.”

“Lonely? You had Elspeth and Audrey, and your house.”

“And I wanted you, and Joy, and Jen, and Mary, and the children. I’ve been *horribly* lonely. I could only bear it if I knew you all cared and I could come home at any time. I’ve felt I couldn’t come, and you didn’t care as much as you used to, and we were farther and farther apart, and I hadn’t anybody——”

Maidlin’s arms were round her. “Ros, I never meant that. Couldn’t we begin again, Ros?”

“If you can forget what an idiot I’ve been,” Rosamund said brokenly.

“I don’t think you have. I know I’m silly. Ros, let’s start again!”

“Will you come and stay in my green room? I can’t have any visitor till I’ve had you.”

Maidlin’s eyes fell. “I’m dying to come. But you won’t——”

“I won’t tease you to tell me anything. I know I’ve made you distrust me. I’ll wait as long as you like.”

Maidlin took her hand. “Come and tell Joy and Jen. Could I go home with you to-night? Or to-morrow, Ros?”

Tea was waiting under the chestnut tree on the lawn before the Hall, with Joy putting milk into the cups and Mary bringing the tea-pot, while Jen sat in a deckchair surrounded by babies. She listened with interested sympathy while Andrew told proudly how Tony had digged a castle all by himself; conversed earnestly with Elizabeth, and checked Margaret as she began some indiscreet story about Tony; and held a serious argument with Rosemary Jane, who lay in her lap and waved little fists and said “Goo!”

Rosamund went to help Joy. “I’ll be your waitress. I’ve come for the night, as I promised, ‘Traveller’s Joy’. To-morrow Maid’s coming home with me, to be my first visitor in my green room, if you can spare her.”

“Aunty Maid will put on your bibs, girlies,” said Maidlin to the twins. “We mustn’t spoil those pretty green frocks, must we?”

“And next time, my children, trust one another, entirely and absolutely and altogether!” Jen advised, as she took her cup from Rosamund.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

YOUNG RODERIC

“Rosamund has lost her father,” Joy looked up from a letter, just before Christmas. “It isn’t a surprise to her. She’d seen it coming.”

“Yes,” Jen agreed; she was lunching at the Hall. “He’d been seedy for months. What about that poor young wife?”

“She’s coming home. Ros offered to give up her classes and go back to the Squirrel House, if Audrey wanted to go to fetch her sister. But Mrs. Kane said there was no need, so she’s coming alone, and Ros hopes to finish her course.”

“But she’ll come to you for Christmas, as she’d promised?”

“Oh yes, that’s arranged. We must have Ros for Christmas. Her stepmother hopes to be home by February.”

“Should have thought she’d want to be home before that. Ros told me about her,” and Jen pursed her lips. “I wonder if he’s left her enough to live on?”

“She’ll be horribly in the way, if she goes to the Squirrel House,” Maidlin remarked. “Elspeth isn’t a bit keen on seeing her again. She hates the whole business of that marriage.”

“Elspeth’s a romancer,” said Jen. “I hope Mrs. Kane will live somewhere else, for everybody’s sake.”

Christmas brought Rosamund home to the Hall for a blissful week of idleness. “But I couldn’t stand it for always!” she admitted. “I’m sure I was right. You each have your job, and so you can bear to live in the lap of luxury, because it means you can concentrate on your own work. But I had no real job here. I’m craving to go back to the Squirrel and set my shop on its feet again. It’s such fun doing things!”

Jen sighed. “My job begins to overwhelm me once more. I’ve had a jolly rest, thanks to Rosemary Jane, but the Lady of the Manor stunt is beginning again. On Thursday I had to give away prizes for Miss Macey, with my everlasting silly grin, which the local papers report as my ‘usual charming smile’. As if I grinned from ear to ear perpetually!”

“Poor Jenny-Wren!” Joy said laughing. “She’s never forgiven that poor reporter!”

“I’ve never been allowed to forget the charming smile!” Jen retorted. “You rotters have rubbed it in so brutally!”

Rosamund’s gifts filled all the back seat of the Rover, when Kenneth fetched her from the Squirrel House. She had made a big cake for each member of the family, icing them herself in appropriate designs.

Jen’s carried a cradle and seven sugar babies.

“I’ve only three!” she protested, indignantly.

“Oh, but you’re going to have the perfect family, and seven’s the perfect number,” Rosamund retorted. “There are those six boys to be fitted in, as well as Rosemary Jane; the morris side, you know.”

“You horror, Rosamunda! Won’t you let me off the six boys?”

Joy’s cake held a harp, and birds to stand for song. Maidlin’s had crossed logs of chocolate, surrounded by little brown people. Mary’s was decorated with pens and an ink-pot.

“What an un-Christmassy suggestion!” she said laughing, and picked off the thin brown sticks and ate them.

The gift of the family to Rosamund drew from her a shout of delight, for it was a loom, which was set up in the kitchen of the Rose House to await her arrival from town.

"I was dying to have one of my own!" she confessed. "But I thought I'd have to wait years for it. I shall weave my own scarves and dress-lengths! Oh, I do love all you dear people! Fancy knowing the one thing in the world I wanted!"

"The seven grown-ups have given you the loom; we include Joan and Jack," said Jen. "The seven babes are going to give you a stock of silks and wools, just to start you properly."

"We are Double Seven!" Rosamund said laughing. "What a good thing I removed myself!"

All through Christmas week she talked of her loom and made plans for the gifts to every one which should be her first work. "Elspeth's dying to have a handwoven cotton frock next summer; lavender and green, she says. I shall try to do it for her; it would mean so much to the kid."

"How about you and Maid, Ros?" Jen caught Rosamund alone the day before she had to go back to town.

"Better; heaps better than we were, thanks to you, Brownie. We've had some really jolly talks this Christmas."

"I'm glad. But not quite as you used to be yet?"

Rosamund hesitated, then laughed ruefully.

"Not quite. Poor Maid! She shuts up at times. It's only shyness, Jen; she isn't keeping things back. If I tease her, she's uncomfortable, so I don't say anything. I feel more than ever how horribly I hurt her. She hasn't quite forgotten."

"You gave her a real shock, and it has left a little reserve. She was a bad subject for experiments, Rosie."

"I never experimented on Maid!"

"Not meaning it. But it came to that. Oh, I know you meant it for the best! But Maidlin needs very careful handling, and I *think* she needs all the gentleness you can give her. Be patient with her, Ros! She has difficulties enough in her own nature, and the fact that she creates them for herself doesn't make them any easier to bear. She's much happier now."

"I'm being gentle, Jenny-Wren. I don't tease her."

"I've thought a good deal about you two," Jen said. "And it seems to me that while Maid thought she was resenting your refusal to help, she was really feeling the change that had to come. You gave her an opening, and she seized it, and said you didn't care. But the real trouble was that your ways were parting and the old school-days' life was over, and she couldn't bear to face the thought. It wasn't possible for you to be as much to one another as you had been. It was the change from family life to grown-up friendship, and Maid's soul shrank back in terror, and she had her bad dream. And since she couldn't bear to admit what had to happen, she said you didn't care."

Rosamund listened, deeply interested. "And just at the wrong moment I refused to help, and she felt she was right."

"Exactly. Neither of you was very much to blame, and neither more than the other. You just couldn't help it. It had to come. But Maidlin feels things very deeply, Ros."

"Yes. I won't hurt her again. I'm glad you've explained, Jenny-Wren. When I come home I shall ask her to stay with me often. We shall come through, in time."

And Rosamund went back to town to finish her course, more than ever eager to settle down at the Rose and Squirrel.

“That cookery diploma is typical of Ros,” Jen remarked. “She doesn’t really care very much about cooking; weaving and all sorts of handiwork appeal to her far more. But she sees the point of being qualified, so she’ll work till she has the full certificate, and it will be a solid accomplishment behind her which she’ll glory in.”

Valentine’s Day was little Andrew’s fourth birthday. In the midst of the celebrations came a telegram from Rosamund: “Diploma awarded: first class. Home next week. See you soon.”

Two days later there came another telegram to Joy. “Can you come to me to-morrow? Urgent. Rosamund.”

“She’s at the Squirrel House,” Joy knit her brows, and hurried to the Manor to consult Jen. “She didn’t mean to be home for some days yet. What can have happened?”

“I shall come with you,” Jen said decisively. “Something has happened, and Ros wants help. Perhaps it’s the stepmother.”

They drove to the Squirrel House next morning. Rosamund met them at the gate, and her face lit up at sight of Jen and Maidlin.

“How topping of you all to come! Come into my house; I’ve rather a big thing to tell you. We’re packing.”

“You aren’t going away, Rosie?” Joy cried, for the handicraft work was packed in big cases and the cushions and curtains had disappeared.

“Yes, Audrey and I, just as soon as we can be ready.”

“But why, Ros? Where to? What has happened?”

“And what about Elspeth?” cried Maidlin.

“Elspeth’s going to board with a woman in the village. Audrey has arranged it.” Rosamund looked at Joy expectantly.

“Oh, couldn’t she come to us?” Maidlin exclaimed.

“Oh, rot!” said Jen. “You can’t dump that nice kid and leave her like that! She’d pine away and die, poor child. We’ll look after her for you. But where are you going, Ros?”

“Elspeth must come and stay with Maid and me,” Joy spoke with authority. “We’ll see about that later. Now, Ros, what is all this about? Isn’t it very sudden?”

Rosamund stood with one hand on her loom, a half-packed suit-case at her feet, and spoke eagerly, her eyes excited.

“Eleanor has been taken ill on her way home, and is in hospital in Malta. She’s better, and Audrey and I are going to bring her home. Audrey’s going to help Eleanor, and I’m going to take care of young Roderic.”

“What? Who?” There was a shout from the three.

“My brother,” Rosamund’s voice had an exultant ring. “I’ve never had a brother or sister. I’m twenty-three years older than young Roderic, but he’s my brother, come at last.”

“Rosie, you are a sport!” Jen cried. “Do you really feel that way about him?”

Maidlin sat down and stared at Rosamund. Joy gazed at her delighted face. “You’re pleased, Ros?”

“My one hope—but don’t tell Audrey!”—and Rosamund lowered her voice carefully—“is that Eleanor will be bored to tears by this place in a month, and that she’ll want to go off to town or back to Ceylon. It sounds extremely likely, from all I’ve heard of her. If she leaves the kid on our hands, I shall claim him; I’m his sister, and Audrey’s only his aunt. I’d let her help; but if Eleanor doesn’t want him, he’ll be mine.”

“And you’d really take on that responsibility?” Joy gazed at her in wonder. “You’d find a baby a fearful tie, Ros.”

“Oh, not a bit! I’ve thought about that,” Rosamund said cheerfully. “In any case, he’d be worth it. But if I wanted to go away, I should park young Roderic with Jenny-Wren. She’ll have a perpetual nursery with trained help for years and years.”

Jen gave a shout of laughter. “Right, Rosamunda! I’ll be your parking-place for brothers! But why Roderic? ‘Rosamund’s Roderic’ is rather nice. I like your choice!”

“It’s Eleanor’s choice, of course. The Squirrels had a brother who came between her and Audrey, who was Roderic. Eleanor was devoted to him, Audrey says. He died,” Rosamund explained. “My brother is Roderic Geoffrey Kane.”

“And you’re really glad about him?”

“Glad? Well, what do you think?”

“You look glad,” Jen agreed. “But I hope his mother won’t be as callous as you expect, Ros.”

“She may develop into a model parent, of course. I believe it does happen sometimes. But at present she wishes he hadn’t come, and she’s begged Audrey to come and help her. You see why I’m going, too, I suppose?”

“To be company for Audrey?” Joy ventured.

Jen laughed again. “To stake out your claim in young Roderic from the first. To make certain that in his young affections big sisters come before aunts. Is that it, Rosie?”

“That’s it. There’s going to be no doubt about it. And I’ve had experience of infants. Audrey hasn’t,” Rosamund said composedly. “I’ve nursed Andrew and Tony and the twins. I do know how to hold young Roderic, and I can give him his bath. I don’t know about bottles; but if a first-class cookery diploma can’t help me to mix a baby’s bottle it’s funny.”

“It will be funny if it does,” Jen suggested. “I mean the bottle will be funny. You’ll do it in aspic, I suppose? Or perhaps you’ll ice it in original designs? Most amusing for young Roderic!”

“Now Brownie’s being funny,” Maidlin remarked.

“Squashed by Madalena,” Jen sighed.

“But suppose she—Mrs. Kane—comes here, where will you put her and the child, Ros?” Joy asked.

“We shall bring her here. Whether she’ll stay or not is another question. She’ll need to have my green room; it’s a good thing you came to stay when you did, Maid! I’ll take young Roderic into my room. If Eleanor wants to have him at night she’ll have to sleep in the big room and I’ll take the little one.”

“Oh, not your blue room, Ros!” Maidlin cried.

“I foresee that the whole of the Rose and Squirrel will have to be re-modelled, to suit young Roderic,” Jen remarked. “What does Elspeth say about him, Ros?”

“That she feels really like an aunt now. She didn’t feel quite like my aunt. I’ve tried to be a good niece to her.”

“She’s more young Roderic’s aunt than she is yours, Rosamunda. What’s this nonsense about boarding her in the village? Is she very keen on the woman she’s to stay with?”

“Not a scrap. But the woman’s a decent old soul, and her house is clean. Audrey says Elspeth will be all right with her. *I* think she’ll be lonely,” Rosamund said.

“Horribly! Why is Audrey being so brutal?”

“She couldn’t think of anything else to do. We can’t take the kid with us; it’s too jolly expensive. It’s going to take most of my year’s dress-money to pay my fare, and Audrey’s using the little she’d saved for repairs to the Squirrel next summer. We can just manage to pay

our way;—no, thanks, Jenny-Wren, I don't need to borrow from you! I will, when I really need to; thanks awfully, all the same!"

"I hope you will. I'll be very badly hurt, if you don't," Jen retorted. "You're an independent little wretch, my child. You know how we'd all love to help you."

"Ros, you'd surely come to me first!" Joy cried. "You wouldn't hesitate, would you? You know you can have all you want!"

Rosamund laughed unsteadily, greatly touched. "My dear people, I know. You'd mortgage the Hall and the Manor to help me, if I wanted to borrow twenty pounds, wouldn't you? I'd ask you if I had to. I know how you'd feel if I didn't. But I don't need help just now. We can pull through, but we can't afford to take Elspeth too. And we can't borrow money to pay her fare."

Joy leaned forward. "But didn't you think of suggesting that Elspeth should come to the Hall? We've plenty of room, and Maid will love to have her."

"Oh, Ros, I want her to come!" Maidlin cried.

Rosamund laughed again. "Joy, old chap, I did. It all seemed simple enough to me. When we talked it over I said, 'And we'll send Elspeth to the Hall, to stay with Joy and Maid'. It seemed so easy, and so nice for everybody. But Audrey was up in arms at once; said Elspeth hadn't been invited, and we couldn't take your kindness for granted like that. That was exactly what I thought we could do, of course, and what I knew you'd like. I said you were always adopting people and you loved mothering them, and that I'd been dumped on you by my headmistress, without your having much chance to refuse, and——"

"Rosamund!" Joy said indignantly.

"Well, look at me!" Maidlin cried. "Look at the way Aunty shoved me into Joy's arms! Poor Joy hadn't a chance!"

"Look at the difference it has made to Joy to have you both," Jen said severely. "If Joy is grateful to anybody, it's to Miss Macey and Aunty Ann for giving her the—er—the joy and privilege of your company. Think of Joy without you two! Think of the lonely Hall, until her real twinnies came along!"

"Think of us two without Joy!" Rosamund retorted.

"Don't waste time being silly," Joy said quietly. "I hope if I ever adopt any more people, that they'll turn out as well as you two and Mary-Dorothy, and come to mean as much to me."

"Yes, of course, Mary-Dorothy was another adoptee," Jen agreed.

"She was your find, though. I merely backed you up and did as I was told. Now, Ros, I'll talk to Audrey. Of course, Elspeth must come to us. I see Audrey's point of view; she couldn't let you suggest it. But I'm glad you took it for granted. I'll settle Audrey's scruples! Maid, where are you going?"

Maidlin stood by the door. "I was going to ask Elspeth, Joy. I knew you'd want her."

Joy laughed. "She'll come, won't she, Ros?"

"She'll be shy. But she'd love it, if you could persuade her to go. She could have my lavender room, couldn't she, Maid?"

Maidlin paused. "Ye-es. I don't like anybody sleeping there but you. But I like Elspeth. All right, Ros! She can have your room. But I shall close the door between; that was only for you to come and talk to me at night. Shall I go and tell her not to be shy, Joy?"

"Yes, go and beg her to come to us. Tell her we'll be lonely with Rosamund so far away, Maid, and say she shall help us to take care of the twinnies. Say I'm coming to talk to Audrey presently. But make Elspeth feel we really want her to come."

“Is she in the Squirrel House, Ros?”

“She’s packing her bag,” Rosamund said. “She hates the thought of being left alone in the village, so I’ve no doubt you’ll find her weeping into her undies.”

Maidlin vanished, and the other three looked at one another and laughed.

“They’ll be good friends,” Joy said. “Maid will interest Elspeth in her Camp Fire. They’ll suit one another.”

“Make them as good chums as you can!” Rosamund pleaded. “For if young Roderic is really handed over to me I shan’t have so much time for Maid, and she may feel forsaken.”

“She’ll take him to her heart, for your sake,” said Jen. “She’s never been jealous of Joy’s twinnies.”

“And you really aren’t upset about this baby, Ros?” Joy asked. “All your plans, and all your home, will need to be altered to suit him, as Jen says. It isn’t a joke; he’ll interfere with everything. You might well be sorry about him.”

“Sorry!” said Rosamund. “I’ve everything, everything in the world. Father never meant much to me; I hardly knew him. I had nobody, except the best and dearest adopted family, and the best and dearest friends. Now here’s young Roderic, really belonging to me; my own family. I’ve my house, and my shop, and a first-class diploma, and my blue room, and my loom. I’ve proved I can support myself; I’m qualified to take a really good cooking job at any moment. On top of it all here’s Roderic. If I ever have him for my own, I’ll have nothing left to wish for.”

“Rosamund, I’m proud of you!” Jen exclaimed, with real feeling. “Joy has brought you up well.”

“Oh, you helped! You did it between you. If you’re satisfied, I’m glad. It’s a real relief to my mind!” and Rosamund held up her blue smock and curtseyed.

“You’re a credit to the Abbey, my dear,” Jen assured her.

“I’m glad you’re so happy, Rosie,” Joy said wistfully.

“That’s lovely of you, Joy! You have been good to me!” Rosamund cried.

“Give our love to young Roderic!” Jen said laughing.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Abbey Girls on Trial* by Elsie J. Oxenham [Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley]]