THE ABBEY GIRLS WIN THROUGH

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The girls entered quickly.

THE ABBEY GIRLS WIN THROUGH

by

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CHAPTER I
WELCOMED BY JENNY-WREN

The three girls in the corners of the railway carriage stopped talking, as the train drew up in Wycombe station, and a fourth girl got in and took the vacant corner.

The first three had talked excitedly as they passed through the London suburbs; then for a time Ann had fallen silent, gazing out at the spring meadows and hills of Buckinghamshire and the endless marvellous shades of young green in the woods. The other two were old friends, who shared rooms together in town; they did not know her very well yet, as it was only two months since she had been taken on in the typing office, where Norah had worked for two years. The office girls had found Ann pleasant and friendly, but she was still "Miss Rowney" to them, and nobody knew very much about her.

Norah and Connie were different. They were a recognised couple. Con, who sold gloves in a big West-End establishment, was the wife and homemaker; Norah, the typist, was the husband, who planned little pleasure trips and kept the accounts and took Con to the pictures.

The stranger girl, who had taken the fourth corner and stopped the Con-and-Norah chatter, had a big shopping-basket full of parcels. The three Londoners eyed her for a moment or two, as the train set off towards Aylesbury; she was fair, with pretty delicate colouring, and she wore navy blue—a long coat and a little bonnet—which looked like some sort of nurse's uniform.

Then the chatter broke out again, and this time Ann Rowney joined in. They were getting near their destination, and she was as much excited as the other two; perhaps more so. She showed it more often by a lapse into thoughtfulness; but now her feelings grew too much for her, and she had to talk.

"What do you all want to do *most*? Pick primroses? Or wander along those little wood paths—have you noticed them?—winding among the trees. Or sit in those red fallen leaves under the bare trees with the gray trunks? I don't know one tree from another, do you? But I can see the differences. I like the white-stemmed ones, with tiny green leaves hanging down like hair. Do *you* know trees by their names, Norah? I've always lived in town."

"I never knew they were so different," Norah said helplessly. "I've just thought of them as trees, all alike, you know."

"I never knew there were so many shades of green before," Ann said reflectively. "I thought trees were merely green! But these are all green and yet all different. I'll have to make somebody tell me the names."

"I want to pick violets till I'm tired," said Con. "I've never picked violets in my life. I want to send boxes of them to everybody. Mrs. White would love to have some, Norah. She's our landlady," she explained to Ann.

"I want to walk for miles on those hills," said Norah hungrily. "I've never had room to walk as far as I liked. It's no fun in streets; and if you go out for the day—we do try to, on Bank Holidays—you always have to catch a train or bus, and to fight to get in, and it spoils the end of the day."

"I know. And a journey home when you're tired; and town at the end of it," Ann assented. "Think of living among all this for a fortnight! It's too wonderful for words. I want to do all

those things; but most of all I want to see the people who could have such kind thoughts for girls they've never even heard of. I can't believe it's true, even now."

"Neither can I," Con said, in heartfelt tones. "I can't see why I should be here at all. You are in the office Miss Devine used to work in, even if she never knew you. But I've nothing to do with the office; I'm only Norah's friend. But Miss Devine not only asks you and Norah, from the office, to come for a fortnight into the country, but sends word that we could bring a friend! I don't see why she should, somehow."

"It makes it far jollier. I wouldn't have gone without you, old chap," said Norah.

"Perhaps Miss Devine remembers that girls often live in twos," Ann remarked. "She used to be in the office herself; she'll know girls don't like to go and leave their other half alone. I do hope we'll see her! I've heard about her so often. I've promised my little sister to tell her exactly what Mary Dorothy Devine is like; she's read her book, of course."

The girl in blue, in the fourth corner, had put down her library book and was listening, amusement in her face. The other three had forgotten her, however.

"I expect we'll see Miss Devine," Norah said. "I want to see her again. It's only a year since she left the office in such a hurry. But it's Lady Marchwood I want to see most. It's her house, and her idea, really. Mary Devine is only carrying on for her while she's abroad. I'm dying to see Lady Marchwood; but I'm afraid we shan't have any such luck. She isn't home from Africa yet."

"She's expected any day now," said the girl in the fourth corner.

The London girls whirled round to stare at her, all taken utterly aback.

"Oh, I say!" Norah cried in dismay. "We—we forgot! We oughtn't to have been talking like that before anybody."

"We'd had the carriage to ourselves all the way," Connie faltered.

"Did we say anything very awful?" Ann's eyes danced in response to the twinkle in the stranger's eyes. "I don't think we could! We feel too grateful. But we should have thought. Please tell us what we said? It was chiefly about trees and flowers, I'm sure!" she pleaded.

"Do you come from the Abbey?" Norah asked eagerly, since their new friend looked neither shocked nor reproachful, but merely amused. "Oh, *will* you tell us more about it all? And is Lady Marchwood really coming home? Is there any chance that she'll come while we're here? Oh, what topping luck! Isn't everything turning out well?"

The girl in blue laughed. "You said very nice things. I couldn't be sure you were our three new visitors until you began to talk about Miss Mary. I was hoping I'd meet you if I came by this train; I've been shopping for Matron. I'm Nelly Bell; I came down a year ago, as you are doing now, for a holiday, and stayed some time, as I wasn't well and I'd lost my job in town; then Miss Mary asked me to help Matron with the babies in Miss Joy's children's home. Miss Joy is Lady Marchwood; but I hear her called Miss Joy all the time, and I forget she's married. I stayed for a while, and liked it so much that I stayed altogether."

"Lucky beggar!" said Con. "Fancy living in the country always!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Norah. "I'd miss town. You'd have to give up heaps of things." She explained matters to Nell Bell. "Miss Rowney and I—the little dark one is Miss Rowney —come from the office Miss Devine used to work in, before she wrote her book and came to live here. This is my friend, Con Parsons, who lives with me."

Ann leaned forward from her corner. "I think you might drop the 'Miss' now," she said reproachfully. "Miss Bell, I'm Ann; but sometimes nice people call me Nancy. I really like Ann best, because it's dignified, and there's so little of me that I have to make the most of it."

"Nobody calls me 'Miss Bell,' " Nell said promptly. "It isn't done. I'm just Nell Bell. The bare gray trees with the red leaves underneath are beeches; and the white ones with little green leaves like hair hanging down are silver birches. Miss Mary taught me trees. You see so much more when you know things."

Ann produced a notebook and gravely put down this information. "Thanks awfully, Nell Bell! That's a good beginning. I mean to learn *all* about the country in these two weeks!"

"Good luck to you! You'll have a busy time," Connie mocked. "I'm just going to enjoy it, and not think about learning names and things."

"It's more fun if you know things," said Ann.

"That's like her," Norah remarked. "We're used to that notebook in the office. She's always putting down things. Won't you tell us more about everything?" she asked Nell Bell. "Where does Mary Devine live now? At the Abbey? When she left us, she said she was going to live in an old ruined Abbey."

"That was only for a week or two, this time last year," Nell explained. "When Miss Joy married and went to Africa, Miss Mary went to live at the Hall. It's Miss Joy's house, close to the Abbey;—but I must remember to say Lady Marchwood! Nobody does, you know; she's still Miss Joy to everyone. Her old aunt, Mrs. Shirley, lives at the Hall, and the two girls Miss Joy adopted, Rosamund and Maidlin; they're still at school. Miss Mary takes care of them all and of the house and the Abbey, and looks after all the village work Miss Joy has started."

"When does she find time to write her books?" Ann inquired. "Her hands must be fairly full, I should say."

"Miss Jen is at the Hall now, too," Nell added. "She's Miss Joy's great friend. She was away at her own home all through the summer and autumn, but she lost her father, and then she came back to the Hall, before Christmas. That's all the family at present—Miss Jen, and Mrs. Shirley, and the girls, and Miss Mary. But they expect Lady Marchwood quite soon. We have to change here," as the train drew up at Princes Risborough. "That little motor train is waiting for us."

"I'm glad we met you! We understand things ever so much better now!" Ann said exuberantly, as the little train carried them along by the foot of the hills.

Nell pointed out the big white chalk cross above Whiteleaf village, and the smaller one at Bledlow. Then, presently, she was able to show the gray tower of the Hall, among the green-tinted woods; and half a mile off, along the hillside, the white walls and turrets of Marchwood Manor.

"That's Sir Andrew's house, where his mother lives. It ought to be Miss Joy's home, now that she's married him, but they say she wants to come back to her own house, for a time, at least. Miss Jen has just got engaged to Sir Andrew's younger brother, so perhaps she'll be going out to Africa next," Nell explained. "Mr. Marchwood's at home for a visit; he lives in Kenya, so I suppose Miss Jen will go back with him."

"What a family business! Is she any relation to the Abbey people?" Norah asked.

"Just a very great friend. She seems to have lived here a great deal; everybody knows her. But she'll be Miss Joy's sister-in-law when she marries Mr. Marchwood, of course. Here's our station; and the wagonette's waiting. Miss Mary always comes to meet people herself, if she possibly can. She says they ought to be welcomed, not just allowed to arrive anyhow."

"How topping of her!" Con and Norah spoke together, eager for a first sight of their deputy-hostess.

"It's a very kind idea," Ann said warmly. She had heard so much during her two months in the office, and from her hero-worshipping little sister, of Mary-Dorothy Devine that she was even more eager to see her than Norah, who had worked with her, or Con, who had never met her. "Oh! But I thought you told me Miss Devine was small and dark?"

"It's somebody else," said Norah disappointedly.

"But isn't she jolly pretty?" murmured Con.

Nell Bell had paused to speak to the porter about the luggage. She came hurrying up, just as the tall girl sitting by the driver of the wagonette leaned down and called to Norah.

"Are you the three new girls for the Abbey? Didn't you meet Nell Bell? Oh, yes, there she is! Then hop in, all of you, and we'll take you home. You caught that train so that you'd get a lift, didn't you, Nell Bell? Very smart of you!"

"It's Miss Jen," Nell said in an undertone, in answer to the inquiring, almost accusing, looks turned on her by the strangers.

Jen, on the box seat, heard and laughed, and turned. "Were you expecting Mary? Some of you were in the office with her, weren't you? She'll come to see you, or you must come to see her. But she's in the middle of a rush of work—proofs that are late and are wanted in a hurry; and she really hadn't time to come to the station. So as I'm doing nothing much for my living at present, I came instead. I'll come in with you; then we can talk. I must make you feel at home! Did you have an easy journey?"

She had climbed down from her perch, and was coming round to the back of the wagonette to join them. She was bareheaded, with waving yellow bobbed curls, and she wore a springlike frock of lavender linen and a green sports' coat. The newcomers felt suddenly very travel-stained and Londonish, and longed to get rid of their own hats and gloves and big coats.

Ann remarked, "I feel like a dirty little town sparrow beside a country——"

"Maypole is the usual word," Jen said gravely, disposing of her long legs with difficulty. "There is rather much of me, I know. Mary-Dorothy would have fitted into this thing much better. That's why I rode outside; so that bits of me could hang over the edge. Sure you've all got room? Right-o! Then let's get home. You must be dying for some tea. Did you get us nice library books, Nell Bell? Oh, cheers! I was wanting that. And all the shopping? Any difficulties? Were you able to get Maidie's songs? And Mary's pencils? She vows she can't write a word with any we can get in the village. You're a benefactress to the whole household, Nell."

As they drove up through the lanes to the village, the London girls eyed her continually. She was so fresh and full of life; as joyous as the thrushes calling overhead. The opal engagement ring on her finger told its own story, and gave the clue to her happiness; there was no trace of mourning for the father she had lost six months before, but this was not forgetfulness, but was rather a sign of her whole attitude to life. She rejoiced for him, and knew no rebellion.

The lane opened on to the village green, a wide triangular lawn, kept in beautiful condition. In the middle stood a flagstaff, which on occasion could become a maypole, as a centre for country-dancing. The parish church, the village hall, a few small general shops, and the Abinger Arms, lay around the green, beyond a wide roadway. There were also two or three old houses, behind high walls, and at the gate of one of these the wagonette drew up.

"If I remove myself, you'll get out more easily," and Jen uncoiled her long legs and jumped out into the road. "Do you see our maypole? We put leaves on the top when we want

to dance round it; the whole village knows ‘Sellenger’s Round’ and a few more dances, and now and then we have festive little occasions of our own. Mary teaches in the hall over there, and so do I, when I’m here. We’re all keen folk-dancers. Now we’ll introduce you to Mrs. Colmar, and then I must—oh, well! I must go home *now*, evidently! Nell Bell, take them in and make them feel at home!” she said laughing.

A big car had come whirling round the corner of the green and was drawing up beside them. Jen waved her hand, and jumped in to take the seat beside the tall young man who was driving, and who had opened the door for her. She threw a laughing look back at the girls, who were just climbing down from the wagonette.

“Wasn’t that neatly done? I didn’t think he knew where I’d gone. But somehow he always does know. It’s a sort of instinct, or—or intuition, or secret sympathy, or telepathy. He always knows; I can’t escape. I’ll see you all again soon. Good-bye! I’m glad you’ve come!” and then the car whirled her away.

“Is that——?” began Ann Rowney eagerly.

“Yes, that’s Mr. Marchwood. She doesn’t want to escape,” Nell remarked. “Did you ever see anybody more radiantly happy? They all call her Jenny-Wren; or Queen Brownie, because her colour, as the school May Queen, was brown. I sometimes think Miss Jen is the real spirit of this whole place; its good fairy. Miss Joy—Lady Marchwood—is the mistress; and Miss Mary is her second, and takes care of everything for her. But Queen Jen is something different; something very special. It didn’t seem itself without her while she was away all autumn.”

“And now she’s going to Africa,” Norah suggested. “What will you do without her?”

“We daren’t think about it,” Nell said briefly. “Come into the house. I’ll take you to Mrs. Colmar; then I must go on to the babies’ house, farther up the road.”

“We’ve been beautifully welcomed, between you and Queen Jenny-Wren,” Ann said fervently.

CHAPTER II
TO LOOK AT MARY-DOROTHY

"It's an old farmhouse," the Matron explained, as she led the girls upstairs. She was a good hostess, gray-haired and kind-faced, and her welcome had made them feel at home at once. "We have four other girls here this week-end, but two have to leave very early on Monday morning. I have one double room, with two beds, and one little room. So sort yourselves out as you wish."

That matter solved itself at once, of course. Ann was by nature a hermit, so far as bedrooms were concerned, and would not have been really happy if she had had to share; and the "married couple" did not want to be parted, even on holiday. So Ann joyfully took the tiny room, and hung out of the window and cheered, to find herself overlooking an orchard, where cherry-trees were white, and the air was scented, and thrushes and blackbirds shouted all day long.

"Couldn't be better!" she said to herself rapturously. "And it's a lattice-window, under a gable! Perfect! Oh, there's the cuckoo! What do I do? Turn my money and wish; where *is* my money? I've nothing left to wish for, I do believe!"

"First time I've heard the cuckoo this year," said Mrs. Colmar, with interest.

Con and Norah were equally delighted with their big low attic room, which had a wide view over the green. "I wish they'd dance out there while we're here!" Con said wistfully. "If they do, we'll invite you in to sit at our window, Miss—I mean Nancy!"

"I hope you do mean Nancy. Nobody could go on being stiff and proper in this friendly place. But if they dance, perhaps I'll be dancing too," Ann retorted. "Come and look out at my cherry-trees! And the red buds on the apples—Mrs. Colmar says the red buds are apples—are the most marvellous colour in the world."

"We've got wallflowers under our window," Norah boasted, sniffing with enjoyment.

"I've got bluebells under my apple-trees," Ann said haughtily.

"I love attic roofs. They feel so countrified," and Con rose rashly from the suitcase she had been unstrapping, and knocked her head on the sloping whitewashed ceiling. "But you need to get used to them," she added ruefully.

Ann laughed, and retired to her tiny room, to smooth her neat, dark, shingled head, and to change her shoes.

"What is the bit of gray roof that sticks up above the cherry-orchard? I can just see it from my window," she asked at tea time, when they had met the four girls already in residence, in the long low pleasant dining-room.

"That's the Abbey. What you see is part of the refectory roof," Mrs. Colmar explained. "The refectory is the highest building left. The rest is mostly in ruins."

"Oh!" Ann's eyes lit up. "Can we see the ruins? I think I want that almost most of all; except perhaps one other thing!"

That one other still greater wish was to be gratified that same evening, which was usual with Ann's wishes, for she saw to it that they should be fulfilled whenever possible. The Abbey was closed to the public at six, Mrs. Colmar explained, but would be open again at twelve next day. Ann thanked her, and perforce postponed her visit to the ruins; and presently went for a walk alone, looking thoughtful.

"To explore," she said to Con and Norah, and added that she would prefer to go alone; but that they would compare notes at supper time.

The two chums had already made friends with the girls in the house, and in their company they wandered off to the woods in search of primroses and violets, and to look up at the smooth round hills on which Norah intended to roam all the next day.

Ann, with thoughtful eyes full of secrets—of eager resolve with just a hint of shyness and of dread of a possible rebuff—turned the other way, up the Abbey lane. She passed along by its low wall, with a wondering glance across the lawn to the great stone gateway, standing all alone and apart from the other buildings—a high arched entrance, leading nowhere now, but she supposed it had once had some real purpose.

Passing the Abbey, she came very soon to the gate of the Hall, and stood there, actually hesitating for several moments, though it was not her way to hesitate. Then, with heightened colour and bright, nervous eyes, she went bravely up the long drive.

She met no one on the way. If she had heard a car coming down, she would have fled or have hidden among the trees. But they were beeches, bare of stem and with great rugged roots; there was no undergrowth to hide an intruder, though she was slim enough to have slipped out of sight behind one of the massive boles. She saw and heard no one, and kept steadily on her way.

The great stone house stood on a wide terrace, overlooking a lawn kept like a bowling-green. All around were flowering trees, prunus of every kind in full bloom, lilacs and laburnums just breaking into flower; the gray Abbey buildings rose above the trees at one side, beyond an ancient wall.

There was no one to be seen. Ann, her heart thumping in a most unusual way, went to the big door and pulled the bell; and jumped, as it clanged.

"It feels such cheek!" she murmured. "I hope she won't mind!"

"Can I see Miss Devine?" she asked of the maid. And, on being asked her name, "She won't know me. But I'm one of the new girls from London; at Mrs. Colmar's, you know."

Almost too nervous and shy to think, and yet, by the laws of her own nature, unconsciously taking in everything, to be remembered clearly afterwards, Ann looked round the great hall as she waited. Dark oak-panelled walls, windows of stained glass, with coats of arms wrought into them in colours, family portraits in heavy frames, polished wood floor, dark oak settles, and tables and chairs with solid twisted legs; big dark wood staircase rising from the hall—these were one side of the picture. Windows wide open to the lawn, the sunset streaming in, white and yellow flowers in delicate glass jars wherever these could stand—narcissi, late daffodils, primroses—these were the other side, and gave lightness and beauty to the stately sombre entrance.

As the maid opened a door, a stream of clear high music came drifting out, sweet piping notes in a gay little tune. Then it stopped very abruptly, and there was a chorus of exclamations of surprise.

Then at the door Jen appeared, in a white frock, as white and yellow as the flowers; a wooden pipe in her left hand explained the music. "Which of them is it? Oh, it's the little dark one! I told Mary-Dorothy there were two tall fair ones and one little dark one, and that I was sure she was shingled, because she'd got such a tiny head. What's the matter? Can we do anything for you? Is there anything wrong? Or are you just in such a hurry to see more of us that you simply couldn't wait——"

"Jenny-Wren, don't be absurd," Mary Devine pushed Jen gently aside. She was smaller, darker, and ten years older than Jen; she wore a handwoven dress of shades of amethyst and blue, and her hair had stray threads of gray. "Come in," she said to Ann. "We're all in here together. I ought to have come to meet you; I was coming round to-morrow morning. I hope you'll be comfortable; Mrs. Colmar is very kind."

"Oh, she's kindness itself, and everything's beautiful," Ann began breathlessly. "I just had to say thank you, or I couldn't have gone to sleep. We love every bit of it, and I think my room's the most perfect of all. I had to come."

"How very nice of you!" Mary began in surprise, for such immediate gratitude was unusual.

Ann's quick eyes had taken in everything; the little oak-panelled library, the tea-tray on a low table pushed to one side, the old lady seated in a big chair, the two schoolgirls on the window-seat, one with two long yellow plaits, the other with black plaits and great dark eyes, both gazing at her in astonished questioning.

"I know you think it's funny of me to come so soon," she began desperately. "But—well, I had to, that's all. It's to please my little sister."

"Your *little sister*?" Jen and Mary spoke together, bewildered and unbelieving; and all five people stared at her blankly.

Ann, scarlet, but with dancing eyes, went on bravely, "Oh, please, I'm not a mental case, really. I must write home to say I'm safely here, and I had to see you first. I daren't tell Sybil I hadn't seen you. It would have been such a blow to her."

"That you hadn't seen us?" Mary asked doubtfully, quite bewildered still and almost frightened.

"No, not the rest; you," Ann explained carefully. "She's dying to hear about you. She's read your book; I gave it to her last Christmas; and she's crazy to know everything about you. She gave me a letter for you."

Mary shrank back, confused and overwhelmed. "Oh, I never thought——"

With a bound, Jen was upon Ann, shaking her warmly by both hands; while Rosamund, on the window-seat, set up a delighted cheer.

"You dear! Oh, how I love you and your little sister!" Jen cried excitedly. "I've been longing for this to happen. You're the first, the very first, outsider to make Mary feel she's a celebrity! It's no use our saying anything, of course; she just says we're prejudiced and not able to judge. She says she thinks a lot of my opinion, but she doesn't really pay a scrap of attention to it. I've told her again and again how good that book is; and the new one's better still. But it doesn't have any effect; she doesn't believe me. But she'll believe you. She can't help it; and we won't let her forget it. Mary-Dorothy Devine, stand up and be looked at! You're a famous author; don't funk! Now that people have begun coming to look at you, I expect there'll be streams of them. Look at her, Miss—Ann, isn't it? Look at her hard; and then tell your darling little sister all about every inch of her!"

"Jen, do be quiet!" cried poor Mary, scarlet, and shy, and embarrassed; and she looked as if she would like to run and hide.

Rosamund sprang to the door and barred the way. "Oh, no, you don't! Stay and be looked at," she mocked. "How does it feel to be on show? It's a jolly good book, Mary-Dorothy; but I don't know that I'd have been as much excited about it as the little sister seems to have been."

"Sybil's only twelve," Ann explained, amused but rather dismayed by the uproar she had called forth. She was not yet used to Jen's tempestuous methods. "She's my step-sister really. I

hope you'll forgive me, Miss Devine. But you do understand, don't you? I must write to Syb to-night; and she's dying to hear what her beloved Miss Devine is like. She says she adores you, and all that sort of thing, you know."

Rosamund gave a shout, at sight of Mary's face. "Send her a photo, Mary-Dorothy! That hideous snap Jen took of you in the Abbey! That would cool her off!"

"Don't be an ass, Ros!" Jen said sharply. Her first excitement had cooled down, and she knew that if they went too far Mary might be really hurt. "It's not funny; it's the jolliest thing that's happened here this year. Sybil has jolly good sense, and I shall write and tell her so. After all,"—haughtily—"the book was dedicated to *me*! I'm sure she'd like to have a letter from me."

"She'd love it," Ann said earnestly. "She'll be thrilled to hear you're real, and that I've met you."

Jen curtseyed, then drew herself up to her full height. "*I'm* a celebrity too! Nobody wants to see you, Rosamunda. Sybil's a very sensible child."

"She's very easily thrilled, if a letter from you will do it; a scrawl, I should say," Rosamund retorted. "I should get Mary to type it, if I were you, Brownie."

Jen turned away from her to Ann again. "I'm really very grateful to you. I've been trying for a year to make Mary-Dorothy believe she has done something worth while by writing that book; but nobody has backed me up. The Press notices helped; but she's forgotten all about them now. She needs a lot of encouraging. I've had serious thoughts of writing dozens of letters, all from make-believe children, and having them posted in different parts of the country, begging her to write a sequel. I thought it was rather a brilliant idea. Unfortunately I was so pleased with the thought that I went and told her all about it, in my first wild excitement, and so it was no good. But you're far better than made-up letters. She can't have any doubts about you. You've really come to look at her! That's fame, I'm sure. And your little sister adores her and is thrilled by her book! *Now*, Mary-Dorothy! Isn't that something to have lived for? Never mind Rosamunda! She's a mere infant, we all know that. What do you think about it, Maidlin?"

The black-eyed girl of sixteen, a year younger than Rosamund, had been listening and watching. "I'm glad," she said briefly. "I liked Mary's book. If I hadn't known her, and somebody I knew was going to see her, I'd have wanted to hear what she was like too. I like Sybil."

"Right you are, Madalena; so do I! But I want to know her name, so that I can write to her; and yours, the whole of it," Jen said to Ann. "I'll always remember you as the first person who came to the Abbey, not to see us, but to look at Mary! You're Ann—what?"

"Ann Rowney; often called Nancy," Ann said promptly.

"Nancy Rowney, I shall thank you for ever, because you've been the first to make Mary-Dorothy realise her importance!" Jen proclaimed.

"The trouble is," Mary said, very quietly, "that whoever comes here, and no matter whom they've come to see, Jenny-Wren always does *all* the talking."

Jen collapsed into a big chair. "Mary, you brute! And I was thanking her so nicely, to cover your blushes!"

Rosamund gave an ironical cheer. "Go it, Mary! Hit her again! Get a bit of your own back!"

Maidlin, her chin in her hand as she gazed at them, broke into a slow smile. "Jen's so big. She always does fill up the picture; a large sort of thing in the foreground, isn't she?"

"Blot on the landscape, sometimes," Rosamund said darkly.

Jen's dancing eyes met Ann's. "Did you say you had brought a letter from your nice little sister, Nancy?"

"Red herring! Change the subject when you're getting the worst of it! Funker!" jeered Rosamund.

Ann handed the letter to Mary. "If you *would* give Sybil your autograph, she'd be happy for ever."

Mary reddened again, and laughed. "Of course I will. It's sweet of her to care."

"It's a very plain ordinary one," Rosamund observed. "You'd better cultivate something more impressive, with flourishes in it, Mary. We'll invent a posh one for her, shall we, Maidie? Give her a dozen, Mary. She'll sell them at school for five shillings each."

"What you'd do, evidently, Ros dear," and Mary sat down to read Sybil's letter.

"Oh, read it out!" Rosamund urged. "I've never heard an adoring letter to an authoress! I might want to write one some day."

But the child's letter, which brought the colour into Mary's cheeks again, was not for Rosamund to see, though it would be shown to Jen in private later.

"I'll tell you all about the new book for next Christmas, Nancy," Jen said kindly. "It's even better than the first one. We're just correcting the proofs, all of us. We try to help; but Ros can't spell 'disappoint' or 'disapprove,' or any other word where you double one consonant and not the other; she got muddled over 'desiccated,' and it went to her head, and now she spells 'disappointment' on the same plan. And Maidie always gets lost over anything with 'ie' in it. So we aren't a very useful crowd. My stumbling-block is 'accommodation'; I double everything I can, and trust to luck. I'll tell you the story, and you can tell Sybil; but you'll have to buy the book; I shan't give away the whole plot. You aren't anything connected with the Press, by any chance? An interviewer in disguise, or anything like that?"

Ann, flushing hotly at the very idea, laughed and denied it warmly. "I'm certainly not an interviewer. I'm sure we'll buy the book. Whom is it dedicated to this time?"

"Oh, Joy, of course; I mean, Lady Marchwood. As Mary says, it was thought of in Joy's woods, and written in Joy's house. Would you like to see the Abbey? There'll be light enough for half an hour yet. I could take you; I love showing it to people."

"Jen shows the Abbey better than any one else," Mary said. "Will you give Sybil my love, and thanks for her letter, if you write to-night, Miss Rowney, and say——"

"Nancy!" Jen said reprovingly. "I've adopted her, because I'm so grateful to her for coming to look at you."

Mary and Ann laughed. "Say I'll write to her in a day or two," said Mary.

CHAPTER III
A PARTY ON THE VILLAGE GREEN

Ann walked soberly back through the beechwoods to the village, after an enthralling hour in the Abbey with Mary Devine and Jen.

All had gone well beyond her wildest dreams; so well that she should have been dancing down the woodland path. And yet she went gravely, almost as though burdened by some new anxiety.

To be shown over the ruins by Jen was a privilege she had never dared to hope for. Jen's love for the Abbey was so intense that she was an ideal guide, and her stories and legends, and descriptions of the life of the white-robed Cistercian brothers, had a vivid reality which any caretaker's must have lacked, however carefully learned. Ann had a lively imagination also, and she had enjoyed the recital as much as Mary had done, when she had heard it first from Jen, two years ago. Ann had also had the advantage of enjoying the reciter, who had not been a new friend to Mary when she heard the story; and she had been studying Jen, and delighting in her animated face and vivid life, while she listened to the tales of the Lady Jehane and Brother Ambrose, and of the spoiling of the monastery; or, coming to more modern times, of the finding of the buried jewels and the Abbey books, by Jen herself, of the hermit's well and the buried crypt. To be told stories such as these by Jen Robins and not by a mere caretaker in charge of a party, was indeed a piece of good fortune for which Ann would always be grateful. Her introduction to new places or persons was apt to colour her feelings towards them for some time; and her first visit to the Abbey and to the girls at the Hall could not have been happier.

Her sober face, as she walked home through the woods, carrying her hat and a bunch of wallflowers from the Abbey walls, was not due to any dissatisfaction with her surroundings, nor to the fact that she had undoubtedly gone one better than her travelling companions, and would presently have to confess where she had been. The cause lay in herself, in a sense of discomfort beginning to make itself felt; she thrust it down, but knew it would have to be faced in time.

At supper, when Norah and Con told of their walk and showed their flowers, Ann owned up. "I've been to the Hall to see Miss Devine and Miss Jen. Yes, I know I might have waited to go with you to-morrow; but I'd promised my small sister not to lose a moment if I could possibly help it; so I thought I might as well walk that way as any other."

"You haven't half got cheek," Norah observed. "It isn't as if you'd known Mary Devine, as I did. There'd have been some reason in my going in a hurry. If you'd told us, we'd have come too."

"Were they nice?" Con asked curiously. "Did you walk up to that great house and say you'd come to see Miss Devine? *I* couldn't have done it!"

"They were topping, all of them. I had a letter for her from my sister; that made a sort of introduction. She was pleased; and Miss Jen was more pleased still," and Ann told a little about her visit and described the hour in the Abbey, to the envy of the other two.

"If you have cheek enough, you always get the best," Con sighed. "I simply couldn't have done it!"

"I don't think they felt it was cheek," Ann said stoutly. "They *may* be saying awful things about me now; but somehow I don't think they are."

She wrote her letter to Sybil, sitting under the lamp in the pleasant dining-room; then went up to her attic, but blew out her candle before she undressed, and sat by the low window above the shadowy orchard, where the white-draped pear and cherry trees looked like dim ghosts, and the mingled scents drifted about on the night breeze. The Abbey wallflowers stood in a pot on the sill; Ann fingered them wistfully as she sat down on a stool, to come to terms with that disturbing thought.

"Couldn't be better! I've nothing left to wish for!" she had said, when she first saw that lattice window under the gable.

Now, reluctantly but deliberately, she said to herself, "*I can't do it!* I can't. I know I can't. They've made it out of the question, just by being such perfect dears. They've disarmed me. I can have a jolly holiday, and enjoy every minute of it. But—no, I can't do the other thing. Not after the way they've made me welcome. And what's more, I'm beginning to think I shall have to confess. Won't I perhaps feel bad if I go away without telling them? I'll have to see about that later. But I never dreamt they'd be so friendly. It takes the wind right out of my sails! And it leaves me rather stranded. If I can't use all this"—she pursed her lips and frowned down at the invisible bluebells—"I'm wasting my time here, in one way. I must just do what, after all, they're expecting me to do; what they think I've come for! And that is, have a thorough rest and a very good time, and enjoy it all to the limit. Everything else must wait."

And she drew the patterned chintz curtains and lit the candle and began to prepare for bed.

Con and Norah clamoured for a visit to the Abbey next morning. But Mrs. Colmar warned them that twelve o'clock was the earliest they could be admitted, so they prowled in the woods for a while with the other girl visitors, and went along to the Babies' Home to call on Nelly Bell. Ann, original always, and solitary in her tastes, while the others preferred to go about in a big merry party, begged to be given something useful to do, so long as it was out of doors.

"I'm very domesticated," she informed the Matron, "and if you really need help, or if there's a wet day, I'll enjoy a morning's housework more than anything. It would be a real treat, after office life in town; I mean it, honestly. I live with friends, who board me, and I never have a chance to do any kitchen work; but I love it. So do make use of me, if you can. There must be heaps to do, with so many of us to feed! But while this sunshine lasts, I do want to be out. Let me peel the potatoes! I'll sit on that bench in the yard."

She carried off the pan and the potatoes, and was sitting near the pump, humming and working, wearing a big overall of Mrs. Colmar's over her frock, when Mary Devine pushed open the garden gate.

"Oh!" said Mary, and began to laugh. "Have they made you work already? But why? Mrs. Colmar isn't shorthanded at present."

Ann dropped a potato into the pan. "I just wanted to. I'm very fond of cooking, and I never get the chance at home. We're all going up to the Abbey when it's open; Norah and Con are mad with me because they say I sneaked in ahead of them last night."

"They'll find it still there this morning. I came to see them. Have they gone out?"

"They're seeing Nell Bell," said Ann. "She told us to come and see the babies. I thought I'd go along when I'd done a job or two."

Mary sat down on the wall of the old well, and looked at her closely. "Why are you so keen to do something to help? It's very kind of you. But it isn't usual. As a rule, girls don't

think about it."

Ann flushed suddenly. She had accepted the invitation—had begged for it, in fact—with a secret motive of her own; the friendly welcome at the Hall had forced the hidden reason up into the light, and she had been ashamed of it; and her half-conscious feeling in the morning had been to do something to atone for it. To offer to help had seemed obvious and necessary. But if Mary Devine were going to give her undeserved credit for a kind and unusual thought, Ann knew she would feel very uncomfortable. She wished Mary had not come just at that time.

"I really do like housework," she said evasively.

Mary saw her embarrassment, and changed the subject at once. Ann knew she was being given credit for modesty and delicate feeling, and grew still more unhappy. She kept her eyes on the potatoes, but peeled wildly and extravagantly; and Mary, seeing it with amusement, said no more, but helped her to forget herself.

"We're going to have a country-dance party on the village green this afternoon," she said. "The dry days have made the grass in such beautiful condition that Jenny-Wren is pining to dance on it. But, as she says, she can't be a party all by herself; and there's no time to call together the school dancing club, of which she and Rosamund are May Queens. So we thought we'd just have a little village party. I think it will be quite pretty. You'll like to watch, won't you?"

"I'd heaps sooner dance," Ann said promptly. "Mayn't I join in? You won't have all super-advanced dances, if it's a village party, will you?"

"Oh, do you dance?" Mary's face lit up. "Oh, that's splendid! Of course, you must join in! Oh, we have dances like 'Butterfly' and 'Peascods' and 'Rufty.' "

"And 'Newcastle'!" Ann pleaded. "I've been to classes in town. I'll simply love a party; I brought my shoes, because Norah told me you were all country-dance mad. I am, too; so I hoped you'd have an attack of madness while I was here."

Mary laughed. "What fun to have invited a folk-dancer! I had no idea. It has never happened before, though we've converted a good many people. Give me a dance, won't you? You'll have heaps of partners. Then it was 'Boatman' you were singing as I came in! I couldn't believe my ears!"

"Miss Jen was piping it last night, when I walked in on you," Ann said simply. "It's been in my head ever since. Did you mind the way I barged in? The rest think it was frightful cheek; they've been ragging me ever since."

"I think it was very kind of you," Mary said warmly. "Sybil's little letter was a great joy, and it was nice of you to bring it instead of posting it. I've written to her, in spite of Rosamund's mockery."

"Syb will be awfully bucked to have a letter from you," Ann remarked.

When the potatoes were finished and Mary had had her talk with Mrs. Colmar, Ann and she walked along together to the Babies' Home, on another side of the green. Mary had come through the lanes from the Hall bareheaded, wearing a morning frock of blue linen; and Ann joyfully fell in with the usual custom and left her hat behind. Her dark shingled head was very neat, and Mary admired its curve and poise, though she made no comment.

Norah and Con had done no country-dancing and were too shy to try; so they had to be content to form part of the audience that afternoon, when the village children and girls, and many of the older women, and a few boys and men, gathered round the maypole and the friend who had brought her fiddle. Jen and Mary, Rosamund and Maidlin, came from the Hall,

and proved energetic stewards, as they directed the crowd into lines of couples, radiating from the pole. Jen, with a village lad, went to the head of one line, and Mary led Ann to another.

"It's 'Bonnets So Blue,' " she said.

"Doesn't Mr. Marchwood dance?" Ann asked, as they waited for the fiddler to tune up. "I thought he'd be here."

Mary laughed. "Oh, he dances! Jen insisted on it, and taught him herself. But he's in town for the week-end; his mother had to visit friends, and he had to look after her. She's very frail now."

"Will Miss Jen be married soon?" Ann asked curiously, as they made the first star in the dance and then Mary led her down the middle.

"He wants to go out to Kenya again. He's getting restive; he hasn't enough to do here. But Jen's mother doesn't want her to go so far. Mrs. Robins is living in Scotland with her married son, and their home in Yorkshire is shut up for the time being. Jen has begged her mother to do without her until Joy has come home; she's desperately anxious to be here to greet Joy. They're all waiting till she comes before deciding anything; it depends partly on her arrangements, and Sir Andrew's."

"I wish she'd come while we're here!" Ann said wistfully. "I would love to see her!"

"She's on her way home," said Mary.

They talked at intervals during the dance, when they were together. When it was over, and rings were forming for 'If All the World were Paper,' Jen came up to offer to be 'man,' and led Ann into a set.

"I'm always man, except when I dance with Kenneth, because I'm bigger than any one else," she explained. "I'd feel silly, and I'm sure I'd look absurd, with you or Mary as my man. We want you to come up to tea at the house afterwards, and tell us what town classes you've been to, and whom you've had to teach you, and what you think of her! It's always thrilling to gossip. Have you been to any of the Hyde Park parties? Or any big demonstrations? Don't tell me now; save it up for tea time."

Ann danced through the party in a state of blissful anticipation. The common interest of their enthusiasm for folk-dancing had lifted her at one step from the position of temporary visitor-in-the-village-guest-house to that of personal friend; she realised her good fortune to the full, and rejoiced in the excitement of the moment, without allowing any awkward or disturbing thoughts to trouble her. She had never dared to hope she would go to tea at the Hall; she was sure business girls on holiday were not usually admitted to the family on terms of friendship. Con and Norah would be envious, but she could not very well ask that they might go too.

The village had taken its cue from its leaders, and the girls and lads were friendly and always welcomed strangers generously. Joy and Jen were their idols, and had taught them by example never to let any one feel an outsider. Ann had plenty of partners; Rosamund came up to romp through "Brighton Camp" with her, and Maidlin, more reserved, said little but smiled and led her into "Rufty Tufty." Nell Bell was dancing, and came to claim her twice, and brought others to be introduced; Ann was never allowed to sit out, or to feel friendless for a moment.

"You've had to work hard!" Jen said laughing; when, after "Sellenger's Round" in one big ring round the maypole, they walked off up the lane, shoes in hand. "Our girls are always like that. They never let you rest for half a minute."

"It's been a lovely party," Ann said warmly. "I do think this is the friendliest place! I can't believe I'd never seen it this time yesterday. It feels as if I'd known it always."

"What a jolly compliment! I shall tell Joy. She'll feel Mary has done her work well while she's been away."

"Mary! Isn't it a good deal you?" Ann suggested.

"Oh, I haven't been here much! I was in Yorkshire for months. *I* think it's Mary-Dorothy's influence. She's only carrying out Joy's ideas, of course; but she has done it well."

"Mrs. Shirley's having tea up in her own room to-day," Mary explained, waiting for them on the terrace before the house. She had slipped away as the last dance began, waiting only to watch the first two figures from the end of the lane, and then going ahead of the rest up to the house. She explained more fully to Ann. "Mrs. Shirley isn't fit for very much, and we persuade her to take a day's rest upstairs now and then. The quiet is good for her. We're so very anxious she should be well when Joy comes; Joy adores her aunt. We'll have tea out here in the sunshine. Sit down and rest! You must be tired."

"I always think 'Sellenger's' will kill me, but I dance it every time," and Ann sank into a chair gladly.

"I funk it," Mary said seriously. "I like to watch, but I do think it's about the most tiring dance there is. There's a letter for you, Jenny-Wren."

"From Joy?" Jen went eagerly towards the house.

"No. From Scotland," Mary was busily arranging the tea table. "Bring out more chairs, Ros. Maidie, fetch those photos Jen has looked out for Ann to see."

"Oh, she's Nancy, not Ann," Jen said absently, standing in the doorway to read her letter. "Sounds so much jollier."

"I like to be Nancy—here!" Ann said enthusiastically.

CHAPTER IV
JEN'S MOTHER

"Mary!" Jen's voice rang out, sharp and terrified.

They all turned to stare at her. She stood in the doorway, her face whiter than her dress, the letter falling from her hand.

Ann and Mary sprang towards her, sure she would fall. "Jenny-Wren dear, what is it?" cried Mary, aghast.

"Brownie, what's the matter? You look like a ghost!" cried Rosamund.

Maidlin, sensitive and highly-strung, had no reserve for emergencies. She dropped the photos she was carrying, and leant against the wall—as white as Jen, shaking all over. "Is anything wrong with Joy?" she whispered.

"It's mother," Jen, dazed, groped for the letter. "Harry says—oh, it can't be! Mary, we'd have had *some* warning! He says—he says——"

Ann thrust the letter into her hands. "Bring a chair!" she commanded, her arm round Jen.

Rosamund sprang to help. "Sit down, Jen, old chap! Here you are; Mary can't hold you, you know."

"I'm not going to faint," Jen said breathlessly. "Only—I've heard of such things happening—but I never thought—so far as we knew she was quite well—I hadn't seen her for months. Oh, *why* didn't I go? Why wasn't there time? It's cruel! She—she wasn't ill at all, Mary," half sobbing, she tried to tell them the story, reading the details as she went on. "It was last night. They found her; she'd felt tired and had gone to lie down. She'd been out for a walk, with Alison and the baby; and it was very cold; they think it had perhaps affected her heart. Harry says she wasn't ill at all; she never knew. There was nothing they could do. Oh, if I'd only been there! I ought to have been with her!"

Mary and Ann looked at one another, their hearts aching for her. Mary, in helpless dismay, was conscious of deep relief that the other girl was there. She could not have borne to be the only one to comfort Jen at this moment. She did not know what to say.

She put her arms round Jen. "Dear! Oh, Jenny-Wren, we're all so sorry!"

"I can't believe it," Jen quivered, and clung to her. "*Mother!* I can't believe she's gone. I won't see her again. Oh, Mary, help me to bear it!"

Mary's arms tightened round her. She tried to speak, but could think of nothing to say that would not seem a mockery.

The comfort came from Ann. "Of *course* you'll see her again! Don't you believe anything, Jen Robins? And aren't you glad for her? She's gone to be with your father; she's only had to do without him for a few months. Now they're together again. Can't you be glad for them? Can't you see past yourself?"

Jen raised her head and stared at her. Slowly a new look dawned in her eyes. "I hadn't thought of that. I hadn't had time," she said eagerly. "It knocked me silly for a moment. Say that again, Nancy! Go on saying it till I take it in! It's going to help me a *lot*. Father—yes, of course. And mother meant so much to him. They were everything to one another; they'd been married forty years. Mother didn't know how to live without him at first."

"Forty years," Ann said sharply. "And how long has he had to wait for her to come? Five months, is it? Five months, only, for her to be lonely here. Nobody could make up to her for

him. She had you, and her sons, and the grandchildren; but she'd always have missed him. Can't you be glad for them, Jen Robins?"

"I am," Jen spoke with bent head, tears in her voice. "I shall be, more and more. I hadn't thought; just at first I couldn't, Nancy. I do see that it's better. When I get used to the idea, I think I shall be glad, for both of them. But—but it was such a shock. She was quite well. I had a jolly letter from her this morning," her voice shook.

"Brownie, dear, it's been a dreadful shock," Mary said pitifully.

Ann withered her with a look of scorn. "But aren't you glad she had no illness, Jenny-Wren?"—the pet name came unthinking, in response to Jen's "Nancy." "When you think, won't you be glad of that too? Did you really want her to be ill, and perhaps have pain, and to know she was getting weaker, and to feel more helpless? My mother went as yours has done; and I've thanked God for it ever since. Not to have pain, not to know, not to feel helpless; what are you sorry about?"

Jen looked up, her face brave, new resolve in her eyes. "Only about myself, Nancy. And that's a very little bit of it. Yes, I see; it's better for her, in every way. And she won't be lonely; father would meet her."

"Lonely!" said Ann. "No one is ever lonely, who goes ahead. There's always somebody to meet every one who goes. We're lonely, who are left behind; but we usually have friends. Think of the friends you have!"

"You're the very newest one; and you've helped me most of all," Jen said thoughtfully. "I suppose that's because you've been through it yourself."

Mary turned away, as if resigning her to Ann. Jen would never know—Mary would take care to shield her from the knowledge—the blow she had dealt in those words; Ann, the newest friend, had helped her most of all.

Mary would have given her life to be able to help. But here was the truth, and it gripped her and left no way of escape—Jen had turned to her for comfort, and she had had none to give. She had not known what to say.

Ann realised something of her trouble. "Miss Mary, couldn't we have the tea brought in?" she asked gently. "It would help us all."

"I'll go!" Rosamund sprang forward eagerly, and ran off to give the order. She, too, was longing to help, but had shrunk back, afraid and awkward and shy.

Maidlin, with no words, but urged by a wise impulse, dropped on the ground beside Jen and put her arms round her. "I wish Joy was here. She'd be so sorry," she whispered.

Jen kissed her. "You must tell her, if I'm not here when she arrives, Maidie. I'll try to come back; I can't quite say when. Oh, of course, I shall have to go," as Maidlin looked up at her in quick distress. "Mary! I must go. You see that, don't you? I—I must see her once more, Mary."

Mary had been aimlessly moving the chairs and tea-cups about, her lips trembling in the dawning realisation of what had happened. She pulled herself together with a tremendous effort, and banished that haunting thought. Here was something to do for Jen; if she could not comfort, she could still serve.

"Yes, you'll want to go at once, Jenny-Wren. I'll get some things together for you, shall I? What would be best? Mr. Marchwood must meet you in town. Shall I 'phone and tell him when you'll arrive?"

"Yes, do, please. You'll have to look up the trains. I could take the car to Wycombe, and pick up a quick train there; that would be best," Jen was thinking clearly now. "Ken will meet

me at Paddington. Tell him I want to go straight through; if he could take me across to Euston, I could catch a night train there."

"He'll go with you, I'm sure," Mary took the time-table from Rosamund, who had heard Jen's words.

"I'll love to have him, of course," Jen said wistfully. "I'm glad I've got him! You'll tell him—all about it, Mary-Dorothy? So that he'll understand?"

"I'll ring him up at once," and Mary gave the book to Rosamund, who was much quicker in looking out trains, and went into the house.

"He sends his love, and he'll meet the eight-thirty, and go on with you after he's given you some dinner somewhere, Brownie," she came back presently, to find Rosamund pouring out the tea and Maidlin waiting on Jen and Ann. "He'll see you safely to Glasgow, so you'll be all right. Shall I go and pack for you, Jenny-Wren? I've told Mrs. Shirley. She's badly upset for your sake. So go in to speak to her before you pack, Brownie."

"Of course." Jen glanced at her anxiously. "This has been a shock to you too, Mary-Dorothy. I'm so sorry! Don't do anything more till you've had tea. Make her sit down, Nancy; she was tired before this happened."

"Oh, don't worry about me!" Mary caught her breath. "I only want to help—to be of use, somehow."

"You're doing everything," Jen said gratefully. "You shall pack for me presently. I shan't want much. It's no use taking clothes from here; I shall have to get new things up there."

They looked at her quickly, for she had not worn mourning for her father, at his special request. She said quietly,—

"It isn't a question of what I like. Harry and Alison have been very good to mother all these months, and her home has been with them. I can't hurt their feelings. Alison is a dear, but she likes everything to be proper and usual. I can't possibly go among her friends wearing colours at such a time, whatever I may feel myself."

That was obvious. Rosamund nodded agreement. Maidlin said, "Of course, you must please them. But not when you come back here, Brownie?"

"I'll see how I feel and decide by that," Jen said quietly. "I'll take almost nothing with me, Mary-Dorothy."

Mary was restless and eager to be doing something to help, afraid to sit still because of the misery within her. She rose to go upstairs, to find Jen's suit-case and to begin packing, and Jen rose wearily to go too, but turned for a word with Ann first.

"You do believe that, Nancy? You really believe it's true? It's the only thing I'm hanging on to just now. I mean, that mother would find father waiting for her, and that now they're together somewhere, wherever it is? You're sure they'd *know* one another? I believe in Heaven, of course; but—but it seems so big. Everybody there! How can I be sure they'd ever meet? Mary, how *can* we ever feel sure?"

"Oh, I'm sure; I'm certain of it!" Mary said hurriedly. "But I don't know how, Jenny-Wren. I just feel that it must be so."

"That's all any one can ever say. But we all feel it, Jen," Ann said earnestly. "It's the one thing everybody in the world wants to be certain about. I can't believe there could be such a craving all through the world unless it was to be satisfied. It would be too cruel. Do you believe God is like that? Would *you* make people, and put that craving into them—the longing that we'll know our friends again—and not mean to satisfy it? Would you make a world like that?"

"No. No, I wouldn't," Jen said slowly. "Then God couldn't. I see. Thank you, Nancy!"

"Don't you think God knows your mother will want your father, far better than you do?" Ann asked quietly.

Jen gave her a startled look. "Of *course*! I quite forgot that! Then it's all right. He'll take care of her, won't He?"

"He'll know what's best for them both, and for you. All we have to do, when we're left behind, is to remember that, and believe it hard, and then be brave when we feel lonely," Ann said bracingly.

"I'm going to believe it *hard*, very hard!" and Jen, with new courage in her face, ran off upstairs to pack.

Mary followed more slowly, one great question surging up in her heart till she almost heard the words. Why had she had no help to give Jen in this time of need? What if Ann Rowney had not been there?

"I say, Mary-Dorothy!" Jen was hauling down her case from a high shelf. "Keep Nancy here till I come back, by fair means or foul! I like her. I want to talk to her some more. If it's time for her to go back to town, do something to keep her here. Break her leg, or give her mumps, or find her a job in the village, or *something*! She's got a jolly lot in her. She's thought things out for herself; I never have. That's the trouble; I've just drifted along and been happy, and felt thankful I was alive and the world was so beautiful. I've tried to be good, and to be nice to people, and to see that the ones I met had a good time; and to play the game, you know. But beyond that I've never thought much about anything. Nancy has; that's evident. I want to ask her things. So keep her here, if you can, there's a dear. If she really has to go, get her address in town, and I'll get hold of her again later."

"I'll keep in touch with her, Jenny-Wren. Perhaps you'll be back before she goes. You won't want to stay there very long, will you?"

"Don't want to stay at all. Want to come back as soon as I can, and if poss., before Joy comes," Jen said briefly. "But I can't say. I'll have to stay at least a week, I should think, between Glasgow and home. We'll have to go home, you know. Mother would want that," and she set her case on the floor and began quickly packing the things Mary brought to her.

"Come back as soon as you can, Brownie. We'll be missing you here," Mary said wistfully. "And if Joy comes, she'll want to see you."

"I'll come the first moment I can," Jen promised.

"Shall we come with you to Wycombe?" Mary asked, as she folded garments. "Choose whom you'll have for company, Jenny-Wren. I'd love to come, and so would the children. But you won't want a crowd. It's for you to say."

Jen looked up. "Do you think Nancy would come? Perhaps she'd like the drive. It might be a treat to her."

"If that's the only reason, I'll see that she has a drive on Monday," Mary began, cold fear at her heart again.

Jen, wrapped up in her trouble, was unconscious of it. "But I'd like her to come with me, if she would. I believe she'd say things that would help me, Mary-Dorothy. I don't want cheering up exactly; I know you and the dear kids would do all that. But I do want something, and I believe Nancy can give it to me. You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind?" said Mary, a catch in her breath. "I want you to have what's best for you, the very best. Nothing else matters. I'll tell her, and I'll fetch my big coat for her to wear. Of course she'll go with you."

She fled from the room, and for one moment took refuge in her own study, because, to her utter dismay and fright, she had turned sick and almost faint. She locked the door, and dropped into a chair.

"Oh, idiot! Idiot! What do you matter just now? Can't you think only of Jen? Nothing else matters. . . . I don't know what's wrong with me, but I daren't think till she's gone. . . . Don't be such a baby! Buck up and help her, do!"

She drank a glass of water and rubbed her white cheeks roughly to bring back their colour; and went downstairs, the big coat on her arm, to ask Ann Rowney if she would go to Wycombe.

Rosamund, all ready in hat and coat, set up a wail. "I want to go with Brownie! I'm going, Mary! I'm all ready!"

"Are you going if Brownie doesn't want you?" Mary turned on her, and the sharpness of her tone betrayed her own heartbreak.

"Oh!" said Rosamund, and stared at her blankly. "N-no, Mary-Dorothy," and she began to unbutton her coat, her lips trembling.

Ann looked at them. Mary had turned away, unable to face any one for a moment.

Maidlin, sheltered by the dreams in which she lived from clear realisation of all this meant, said with a sob, "We're only kids, Ros. We can't say the proper things. I wish Joy was here! Brownie wants somebody really grown-up just now."

Rosamund's unhappy eyes went from Ann to Mary, an unspoken question in them. But a fine intuition held it back, and she said nothing. She took off her hat and hung it up in the little cloakroom by the garden door, and turned to Mary. "Isn't there anything I can do, Mary-Dorothy?"

Mary was idly turning the pages of the time-table, struggling for self-control. This crisis had hurt Rosamund's awakening sensibilities deeply, but it had just about broken Mary's heart. She shook her head, unable to speak.

Ann said quickly, "Couldn't you put down those trains for Jen, so that she won't have to remember when she's due in town? She'll get thinking, once she's in the train, and she won't want to be bothered with things like trains."

Rosamund gratefully seized the book. "Find me a pencil, Maidie! And come and help."

"Has Jen got rugs for the night journey?" Ann asked of Mary.

Mary had not thought of that. "I'll get some; and straps," she said, and began to hurry about.

Ann's understanding eyes had seen all the tragedy. These three, Mary, Ros, and Maidie, would have done anything to help Jen in this crisis; the two younger girls loved her, Mary worshipped her. It was all obvious. And yet none of them knew what to do, how to say the things she was needing to hear; not one of them had the right word for her in her trouble.

"Pity I was here!" Ann thought. "And yet I don't know. Jen has to be thought of first. She needed somebody, and they just went all to pieces. I wonder why? With their love for her, they ought to have been able to help. One can forgive the children; but what about Miss Devine? She knows she's failed; it's breaking her heart. I don't understand her. She's felt it more because I was here; it's been worse for her, though better for Jen. I wonder if she'll talk to me about it afterwards? I don't think I'll dare to ask her!"

Then Jen came down, dressed for the journey, after a few minutes in Mrs. Shirley's room, and Rosamund called that the car was at the door.

Ann turned away, and was very busy putting on Mary's big coat and the leather hood which belonged to it, while the farewells were being said.

Rosamund carried out the rugs and suitcase and stowed them away under the seat. "Well, good-bye, Brownie, and good luck to you!" she said, a lump in her throat.

Mary tucked the rug round Jen, quite forgetting that Ann was still to come. "Come back soon, Jenny-Wren! And wire us from Glasgow."

"Ring us up from Paddington," Rosamund amended. "Ken will see to that."

Maidlin, wordless and in tears, clung to Jen and had to be dragged away gently by Mary.

"Take care of Maidie, Mary-Dorothy," said Jen, and made room for Ann beside her. "Good-bye, all! Give my love to Joy when she comes."

Then the car whirled away and she was gone.

CHAPTER V
ROSAMUND TAKES CHARGE

Mary turned to Rosamund. “Ros, comfort Maidie somehow. I’ll come presently. I’m not well; you must do without me,” and, on the verge of a breakdown, she fled to her own room.

Rosamund looked frightened. “I say, Maidie, do buck up, old girl! Did you see Mary’s face? She looked ghastly. This has knocked her all to bits. She’s awfully keen on Jen, you know.”

“We all are,” Maidlin steadied herself with an effort. “It’s cruel that Jen should have such things happen to her. She’s good to everybody, always, and yet things always go wrong with her. It was bad enough about her father, but she did have time to think about that. But this *is* cruel, Ros!”

“I don’t believe Nancy would let you say that.” Rosamund slipped an arm round her waist, and they wandered down the bank of the terrace and across the lawn together. “She’d have some good reason why it isn’t. But I don’t know what it would be. But I’m bothered about Mary-Dorothy, Maidie. It would be horrid if she were ill; and she looked ill.”

“But why should she be ill? We’re all sorry for Jen, but it doesn’t make us ill,” Maidlin argued.

“No, but Mary cares such a thumping lot about Jen, and she takes things so badly. Biddy told me that. Before she went to France, a year ago, she said to me that something had once gone wrong between Mary and Joy; I don’t know the story. But she said Mary had cried till she was almost ill, because she cared so much about Joy. And then she said, ‘And she cares even more about Jen. If ever she should have trouble with her—but I can’t imagine it.’ Neither could I, so I didn’t bother. But it looks as if it had happened.”

“What kind of trouble?” Maidlin asked doubtfully. “You don’t mean that she could quarrel with either of them? Nobody could, Ros.”

“There are other things besides quarrelling,” Rosamund said, with the wisdom of seventeen instructing sixteen. “I don’t know what it was with Joy; Biddy wouldn’t say a word. It wasn’t quarrelling, for you know how much Joy thinks of Mary, and how fond Mary is of Joy. I can’t imagine what happened. But now——” she sat on the edge of a garden seat and reviewed the situation, with her own experience to help her—“don’t you think perhaps Mary wanted to go to Wycombe with Jen? *I* did. If she knew Jen would rather have Nancy, that might upset Mary quite a lot, don’t you think so? That’s how I felt. I see now it was better for Nancy to go. She’s older, and she could say things that would help, and that’s what Jen needed. But for a minute or two I felt awfully bad, to know Jen didn’t want me. Perhaps it’s the same with Mary, only worse. For Mary does worry so over things. You know how we’ve ragged her and said it was her artistic temperament coming out!”

“She needs it to help her write her lovely books. That’s what Jen always says,” said Maidlin.

“I know. But it makes things extra bad for her when any trouble happens,” Rosamund said wisely.

She sat swinging her legs and pondering, while Maidlin, with a wistful, “I do wish Joy would come!” lapsed into a dream of a happy future, when Joy was living at home, and Jen had come back and was happy again, and every one had everything and was content.

"There's Mrs. Pennell from the village!" Rosamund said suddenly, as a young woman came through the Abbey gate and towards the house. "I wonder what's up?" and she went flying across the lawn.

Maidlin woke from her dream with a sigh, and followed.

Rosamund met her, dismay in her face. "The Institute class! It's at seven. You know, Jen meant to have tea and then hurry back; she wouldn't put it off. They're all waiting for her down there."

"They'll have to go home. They'll understand," Maidlin faltered. "Or shall we tell Mary-Dorothy?"

Rosamund was the type who could rise to an occasion. "We can't worry her. She's ill. But Jen wouldn't like the class put off. *We'll* take them, Maidie. It will be something to do for Mary and Jen."

"We couldn't, Ros!" Maidlin shrank back, aghast at the thought.

"Of course we can. Haven't we been to Chelsea? We know reams more than they do. Come on, old chap, and back me up! Don't funk!"

Mrs. Pennell's face lit up. "If you would, Miss! Everybody'll be pleased."

"I'm game," Rosamund said briefly. "Maidie, run to the house and say we've gone to the village. Then come after me; you don't want to be left out, do you?"

Not to be left out was one of Maidlin's ruling passions in life. Her power of initiative was quite unawakened, but she could follow, and her desire to follow Rosamund carried her on many a time when she would have stood still if left to herself.

She went to give the message, then took the path through the Abbey ruins to the village. Shyness overtook her as she reached the Institute, but she went in bravely, and a group of women in the doorway smiled and made way for her to pass.

Rosamund, with heightened colour and very bright eyes, stood on a chair addressing the class of girls, and young men, and older women. She was telling of Jen's trouble and sudden departure; and a sympathetic murmur arose.

"It wasn't possible for Miss Devine to get away," Rosamund explained. "So if you'll put up with me, and if you don't mind too much, I'll do my best to help you through, just for to-night. I hear you're learning 'Oaken Leaves.' I know it, so that's all right. Make up sets of eight, and we'll see how much you remember."

"I thought that was a good way to start," she murmured to Maidlin, as the class clapped, and laughed, and began to arrange itself in sets. "It sounds kind; I'm sure it's tactful! Of course, they won't remember *any*, but we'll pretend not to notice that."

Maidlin watched with admiration and deep envy as Rosamund, who had never taught in her life before, took command, watched critically, made pointed yet kindly comments at the end, and demanded the dance over again. But Rosamund had watched Jen teaching many a time, and she had not a trace of shyness. She had not been twice a May Queen in a big school for nothing, and her slight diffidence vanished as she gained confidence.

The hour that followed was enjoyable to all. Maidlin forgot herself enough to join in and make up a set for "Hey, Boys," so that three girls should not have to sit out; and Rosamund watched her dancing with much satisfaction. Maidie was always less dreamy after dancing; in dancing, in her singing lessons and practice, or in dreams of Joy's return, she forgot herself entirely; but while the first two were healthy for her, the last was not so good, and Rosamund had private orders from Jen to "keep Maidie from mooning about and going inside herself." Just what that meant Rosamund did not know; she was not in the habit of "going inside

herself." But she did know the signs of it in Maidlin, and she understood it was not to be allowed.

"You're a sport, Maidie!" she said warmly, as they walked home through the Abbey together. "It helped tremendously to have you joining in. Your dancing's jolly good; you're so light, and so full of music; and they all try to play up to you. You bucked up that whole set."

"How can dancing be full of music?" Maidlin asked doubtfully, always distrustful of herself.

"Yours is," Rosamund said briefly.

"It's just by chance, then. I love the way you teach, Ros. You should take them again for Mary."

"It was rather fun," Rosamund admitted. "I say, Maidie! You know what all the girls want! Won't you rise to the occasion?"

Maidlin flushed and shrank. The suggestion that she should be the new May Queen, to follow Jen, had startled and dismayed her. She did not know that the proposal had been made to the Club by Rosamund at Jen's suggestion, and had been accepted by the girls only on Rosamund's promise to prompt in the background and to keep Maidie up to her duties; for the girls quite frankly felt it would be undesirable to have a dreamy Queen. But Jen had felt that here might be a cure for Maidlin's growing tendency to withdrawal into an inner world of her own, and had urged her election on Rosamund and on the Club with energy. The invitation had been given at the Club's last meeting, a few days before, and Maidlin was supposed to be considering it, and to be about to make her gracious acceptance of the honour known very shortly. Actually she was trying, nervously and desperately, to find some way of escape which would not disappoint Jen and Rosamund too deeply.

"I'm not good enough, Ros," she pleaded. "You know I couldn't do it. It's awful for anybody to have to come after you and Jen; you've been such ripping Queens. It's simply silly to think of *me*."

Rosamund looked at her with amusement. "Maidie, you are funny! I was in the seventh heaven when they asked me."

"I'm not," Maidlin said unhappily. "We're different."

"Well, I should say we are," Rosamund chuckled. Then she said more earnestly, "Think how pleased Joy would be, Maidie!"

"Oh, *shut up*!" blazed Maidlin, and fled to hide herself in a corner of the garden.

Rosamund started in pursuit, then checked herself, and laughed. "Poor Maidie! That's the one thing that upsets her. She knows Joy would like it. I don't understand her a scrap. If it comes to that, I don't understand Mary-Dorothy either. I don't know why she's so fearfully upset. It's awfully jolly for me, with Mary on one side and Maidie on the other! I'm glad I don't have feelings; at least . . . well, I do! But I do think I've got them in better order! Maidie can't manage hers at all; and it seems as if Mary-Dorothy sits on hers, but now and then they get on top of her. I suppose she and Maidie have 'temperaments.' Thanks be, I'm just plain and ordinary!—All the same, ordinary people are useful. What would happen if we were all like Maidie and Mary? Mary's books would happen, of course, and Maidie's singing; but things like those wouldn't run the house or keep Joy's clubs going! I guess both kinds of people are needed—I *and* Maidie! I won't tease her now; she'll come along presently, and it will be all right. I won't plague Mary-Dorothy either. She'll come down when she wants to."

Rosamund stood in the hall, hesitating. "I'll begin a letter to Jen, telling her I took the club for her. But I'll go and talk to Mrs. Shirley first; she'll be feeling left out of everything.

Perhaps Mary has been with her."

She went hopefully upstairs, but found the old lady alone and waiting anxiously for some one to talk to. The maids had told her the girls had gone to the village, but had not been able to give the reason, and she had wondered, and fidgeted, and had grown anxious at last.

Rosamund put aside the thought of her letter and sat down on a stool at Mrs. Shirley's feet, to tell the story of the evening's class.

CHAPTER VI
IN MARY-DOROTHY'S ROOM

Rosamund's estimate of Mary had been accidentally correct. Mary's feelings, once roused, stirred her to her depths; she was afraid of them, and never, if she could help it, allowed them free play. Now and then they broke loose and swept her off her feet.

To-night the revelation of her powerlessness to help Jen in her need had almost broken her heart. She loved Jen better than her life; but in Jen's direst need she had been unable to help her. She had failed her friend at her biggest crisis.

It all came back on her, as she lay broken on her bed, in a torrent of realisation under which she went down; and she lay and cried till she felt sick again.

"Brownie wants somebody really grown-up just now," Maidlin had said. "We can't say the proper things."

"You're the newest friend," Jen had said to Ann Rowney. "But you've helped me most of all. Thank you, Nancy!"

And to Mary she had said, warmly grateful and not dreaming that the words could hurt, "I don't want cheering up. You and the dear kids would do all that. I want something, and I believe Nancy can give it to me."

"Why couldn't I help her?" Mary questioned, forced up against the fact of her failure. "Jen was right to think of me with the children. She knew we couldn't really help. Why—*why* couldn't I help? I couldn't have said any of those things Ann Rowney said, and yet I believed them all as soon as she said them. But I didn't think of them. They—they weren't really part of me,"—she was getting near the truth.

"Ann was ready, because she'd thought it all out long ago and had made it part of her. I ——" she quivered with shame, and hid her face—"I've never really thought. I've been afraid; and it has been too much trouble. I've put it all away from me. Jen said that of herself; but I'm ten years older than Jen. It's worse in me. No one could blame her. But I *ought* to know what I feel and what I believe. And—and I don't," she confessed brokenly. "It's been so easy to put off thinking, and just to dream and plan, and—and to write my little stories and live in them, and never to think about big things. And now, when I need my mind made up so that I can help somebody else, I haven't any mind at all."

She lay and faced the truth. "It shan't happen again," she vowed, and buried her face in her pillow. "I will—will what? What can I do? I can't change myself. It's too big a job for me. But I'll be different somehow. I want help. Where can I find it?"

As she went over it all again, a new thought came, and held at least a germ of growth, and so of help. "I ought to be thinking about Jen. I've been sorry for her all through, and I've wanted to help her; but I've been thinking about myself, what *I* wanted, how *I* felt. Ann forgot all about herself, and thought only of helping Jen. But almost from the first, I was thinking how I'd failed her and how awful it was; and it made me still less able to help. I didn't think of the right things even to *do*. Ann had to tell me to get tea—and told Ros what to do—and thought of the rugs. Jen said I was doing everything, but it wasn't true. I was hardly any use; I just collapsed like a baby—and it was because I was so much upset because she turned from me to Ann. I forgot her trouble in thinking about myself. Ann could forget herself; I couldn't.

I'm just—just like a child. I haven't grown up properly. When a grown person's needed, I'm no use," Mary thought hopelessly.

Then she sat up. "I'm thinking of myself *now*. It isn't the time for that. Perhaps, at night, it might be right; I feel I ought to think. But just now there must be things to do. Those poor girls! I've left them alone too long. And Mrs. Shirley—*oh!* Oh, how horrible I am! Selfish all through!" and she sprang from her bed, and began to tidy herself at feverish speed.

"I have been mean! I never thought. That's the whole trouble, of course. I don't think; I live on the surface of things," and Mary stood for a moment and looked at herself, her life, as if from the outside.

Then, with set lips, she poured cold water into her deep yellow basin and bathed her face. "I've got to be different. I've got to be changed somehow. I don't know how to do it, but I've got to pull up. I don't believe—I don't believe I'm really very much better than I was two years ago, when Joy and Jen came to me and Biddy in London. I thought they'd rescued me, and I've been content, and—and rather well pleased with myself," and her face burned again. "I'm beginning to feel doubtful about the improvement. I'll think that out at night; I will! This isn't the time."

She hurried to Mrs. Shirley's room, feeling guilty and anxious, and her face fit up in relief at sight of Rosamund in charge.

"Oh, Ros, how good of you!"

"Come and hear what I've been doing!" Rosamund cried triumphantly, and thrust a chair towards her. "I took Jen's class at the Institute, and we had a ripping time. Teaching's awful sport; I want to do some more. I'll keep it on till Jen comes back, if you like."

"I forgot the class," Mary faltered, and the colour rushed into her face. "I say, Ros, you are a good sort!"

"I loved it, and so did they. I'm going to write and tell Jen. You don't think she'll mind, do you? Will it worry her, Mary-Dorothy?"

"No, she'll like it. And she'll be ever so grateful. Where's Maidie?"

"Under a laurel bush somewhere in the garden," Rosamund said grimly. "I tackled her about the May Queen stunt, and she told me to shut up, and scooted away to hide. She'll come in presently."

"There's the car outside. Come and ask Ann Rowney if Jen caught the train," said Mary eagerly.

From her hiding-place Maidlin had seen the car, and had come to hear the news. Her eyes fell when Rosamund looked at her, but in Ann's presence it was easy to ignore her embarrassment.

"Jen got away very comfortably, with a carriage to herself," Ann was taking off the bonnet and big coat. "She'll be all right; I shouldn't worry about her now. It's been a terrible shock to her, but she's too brave to go under. She's pulling herself together already."

"She was splendid about her father," Mary said.

"Brownie's got no end of pluck," Rosamund remarked. "She hasn't had an easy time, you know. Mrs. Shirley was reminding me of things that happened long before I knew any of them. Jen had to leave school at sixteen, and she felt really bad about it; and then she had that awful accident not a year later, and was ill for months. At one time they thought she'd never walk again, let alone dance. Then her father was ill for years, and then she lost him; and now she has this awful shock about her mother. It's a wonder she isn't sour and old and crusty."

"She's like sunshine," Maidlin said briefly.

"I didn't know all that," Ann admitted. "But I could see her courage. She'll be all right, Miss Devine. And she has Mr. Marchwood; he will help her more than anything."

"I'm jolly glad she's got something left!" said Rosamund. "It *is* hard on her, Nancy! She seems to get all the knocks."

"It's cruel," Maidlin said vehemently.

Ann looked at her. "I couldn't feel that. Everybody has to take a share, in time. If Jen can take hers and yet be still your happy 'Brownie,' she's done a big thing and we'll all be the better for it. Thank you for your coat, Miss Mary! I must hurry back to the village for supper. They'll think I'm lost."

"If you'll come to tea to-morrow, we'll tell you what message we've had from Mr. Marchwood, and if Jen has wired from Glasgow," said Mary, and put her arm round Maidlin. "Come and tell Mrs. Shirley how Ros taught the village, Maidie! We've had her own version; now tell us what you think."

"It was ripping!" Maidlin said fervently. "They loved it, Mary!"

That night Mary, after some hesitation, went along the corridor to Rosamund's room. It was a recognised ceremony that she should visit Jen, or Jen should visit her, at bedtime for a few moments of private talk. Ros and Maidie, with the door between their rooms open, paid similar visits to exchange confidences. But to-night's invitation was a new departure.

She tapped on Rosamund's door. "Ros, come along to my room and chat?"

Rosamund leapt out of bed, tossing back her long yellow plait. "Mary-Dorothy, you sport! Maidie too, of course?"

"If she likes. But put on something warm."

"You bet!" and Rosamund hurried into stockings and slippers and her blue woolly dressing-gown, calling directions to Maidlin through the open door.

Maidlin, in a warm crimson kimono and with tousled black pigtail, came in, looking wistful. She was very lonely, a little lonelier than usual because Jen was in the train, racing away to Scotland. But Maidlin's heart had gone to Africa with Joy, and she would be lonely till her "mother" came home again.

They entered Mary's room, to find the kettle singing on the gas ring, and Mary, in a loose gown that matched the old gold of her curtains and bedding, arranging brown and gold cups on the little tray which had been Jen's "housewarming" gift to her.

"Oh, Mary-Dorothy, you angel!" Rosamund sighed in ecstasy, and sank down on a stool before the fire. "How I've longed to be asked to midnight coffee! But you never did before."

"She's had Jen," said Maidlin. "In a few days perhaps she'll have Joy," and her face grew radiant.

"Joy may not care to come. She's much more likely to go to Jen," Mary said quickly. "If Jen's here, they won't want me. These are times when two are company but three aren't. I count you two as one, of course. It's cocoa, Ros. Help yourselves to biscuits."

"I don't care what it is. It's having it when every one's gone to bed that's the ripping thing," Rosamund said rapturously. "It's jolly good, though."

Mary laughed, and was glad the thought had come to her and that she had acted on it. "I like Ann Rowney," she said tentatively, by way of an opening.

"She's topping. She's got jolly ideas. I say, Mary-Dorothy!"

"I knew you'd want to talk, Rosamunda," Mary said quietly. "I feel I wasn't quite fair to you this afternoon. But I couldn't think clearly at first. I really did feel bad. I wanted time."

“Mary, you’re rather a dear,” Rosamund said warmly. “I have been awfully worried. What did happen exactly? I felt uncomfy, and you looked dreadfully bad. Why didn’t Brownie want either of us? I’ll never be quite happy again unless I understand. Nobody could be keener on her than we are.”

“And yet she wanted Nancy,” Maidlin was plainly puzzled also.

Mary was deeply glad she had not shirked this responsibility. She had been sorely tempted to leave the girls to their bewildered questionings, but had been ashamed to do so.

“She wanted Nancy because we had all failed her,” she said bravely. “Ros, we’d better face up to it. Weren’t you glad Nancy was there?”

“A thousand million times!” Rosamund said fervently. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“Well, that’s why Jen wanted Nancy.”

Maidlin sat listening, chin in hands, staring at the fire. She was very childish still, and was much more than a year behind Rosamund in most ways.

Rosamund knit her brows, and gazed at Mary. “I’m only a kid,” she said at last. “I hadn’t anything worth saying. I just wanted to hug Brownie and say I was sorry. I hadn’t any ideas about anything.”

“Neither had I,” Mary spoke with a vehemence which made Maidlin sit up and stare at her. “I didn’t know I hadn’t. I can’t have thought much when my mother and father died. I remember feeling numb and broken to pieces for weeks. I think I felt so bad that I didn’t dare to face it, and so I put it away. If I’d thought, and learnt things from that trouble, I’d have been ready to help Jen to-day. I wasn’t ready. Don’t you see, Ros? Don’t you see what we do when we won’t face things?”

Rosamund gave her a startled look. “We lose chances, and then later on we’re sorry. I do see, Mary. I say, you are a brick to tell me, Mary-Dorothy!”

“Nobody could blame you,” Mary said quickly. “You haven’t had any trouble come very near you yet. But it will happen, Ros. When it does, look at it fully and bravely, and don’t run away. *I* ran away; I must have done, or I’d have been able to help Jen to-day.”

“You aren’t running away this time,” Rosamund exclaimed warmly, with a flash of insight.

“I shall try never to run away again,” Mary spoke with deep feeling.

Maidlin’s hand crept into her lap. “Mary, do I run away?”

Mary had a moment of panic, for here was a real responsibility. Maidie’s whole life was spent in running away from reality, but would it be safe to tell her so? She was so intensely sensitive and highly strung; a full understanding of the truth about herself might frighten her seriously.

But the question had to be answered, and this time Mary need not hesitate, for she spoke of things she knew.

“You must decide that, Maidie. I’ll tell you how I ran away. When any idea came that I didn’t like, instead of making up my mind about it, I put it right away and lost myself in the stories I used to make up. Nobody knew; it was my secret. It kept me very happy, and things didn’t trouble me much; but the result of it was—what happened to-day.”

Maidlin’s black eyes were bigger even than usual. “I think perhaps I do that sometimes,” she said. “But I don’t make stories.”

“You go inside yourself, though, old chap,” Rosamund said bluntly. “I don’t know what you do there, but you do disappear inside and shut the door.”

“Do I?” Maidlin reddened. “I didn’t think any one knew.”

“I’m not going to do it any more,” Mary said quietly. “It’s a—a bad habit, Maidie. Shall we both try to get out of it?”

Maidlin stared into the fire, and reddened, but said nothing.

Rosamund looked up wistfully. “Mary-Dorothy, what about me? I’m different from you two. I don’t make stories, or think, or dream. If you and Maidie are making vows, isn’t there anything for me to do? It’s always jolly to feel you’re tackling something big.”

Mary laughed ruefully. It was a kind of “jolliness” she avoided till the last possible moment. “You couldn’t help Jen either, Ros. And you’ll never be any good when people are in trouble unless you think for yourself. Maidie and I run away into dreams; you escape in some other way. I think perhaps you get busy and do things, and rush round and be useful. It’s a much better way than ours, but still it is escape.”

“Like taking that class to-night. I didn’t want to sit still and think; I was awfully glad when the class came along,” Rosamund confessed. “Mary, I believe you’re right. I kept on the go so that I wouldn’t have to face up to the thought that I hadn’t been any use to Brownie. I knew I hadn’t; but I didn’t want to think about it. We’re *all* slackers, Mary! But you’re the best of the lot, for you have faced up to this and thought it out. And there wasn’t any need for you to give yourself away to us. I do think you’re jolly decent.”

Mary coloured hotly. It had been a great effort to her to speak out, but she had felt it to be a duty which she could not shirk. She was more than repaid by the new respect in Rosamund’s voice and look, and by the deepened affection which Rosamund showed for her in the days that followed.

“I’m going to try to take myself in hand,” she confessed. “Perhaps we could all try together. It’s easier not to do things alone. And now suppose we go to bed.”

“Poor Brownie, in the train all night!”

“But Ken’s with her, Ros,” Maidlin reminded her, as they picked up their cups from the hearth and said good-night.

CHAPTER VII
AN OPENED DOOR

Maidlin, for all her reserve and difficulty in self-expression, was the first to take a brave step in a hard new path.

As they reached her bedroom door, she turned to Rosamund, flushed with the effort to speak. “Ros, I was horrid this evening. I was rude. I’m so sorry,” and she waited shyly, like a doubtful child.

Rosamund could hardly believe she had heard aright. Maidie, shy, proud Maidie, offering an apology! What it had cost her no one could ever know, but Rosamund could partly guess.

She put her arm round the younger girl’s shoulders, and led her gently into her room, with an almost brotherly air of protection.

“That’s all right. You know it’s all square, old chap. D’you really hate the idea of being Queen so fearfully?”

“I’m frightened,” Maidlin quivered. “I’d have to do things alone, and to feel important, and to pretend I liked it.”

Rosamund smothered a laugh that was half a groan. “Those are the very parts of it I loved; to have the school looking up to me and depending on me! Aren’t things funny? Good-night, Maidie! Don’t worry about it to-night. And don’t dream! Call me if you want me.”

She left the door between their rooms open, as usual, for Maidlin had been troubled by nightmares lately, to Mary’s distress. To-night, however, no cry came from her, and Rosamund slept unawakened till early morning.

She woke at sunrise, and lay thinking, for she had been dreaming herself, for once. Then at a sudden thought she leapt out of bed.

“It was this morning—Sunday—we’d planned for! I’d forgotten all about it, in the upset over Jen. What on earth shall I do? I wish now I hadn’t. But I can’t let the girls down. I’ve never yet let anybody down as badly as that. Oh, bother, bother, bother! Why do people do mad things? And after last night!”

But even while she hesitated, she was dressing quietly, at express speed. It was a brilliant April morning, and still very early. Rosamund, not daring to go to the bathroom, washed hurriedly in her own room, slipped into the blue school tunic which made her legs look so long, and her green girdle, and hastily plaited her hair in its two long braids.

“I’ll have to put it up soon! Nearly eighteen; and going on like a kid of thirteen, I am. Don’t know what I’m going to do when I get there! But the girls will be waiting for me, and it would be awful not to turn up. Even if I squash the whole thing, I’ve got to go. Shan’t take Maidie, though; and she’ll be glad. She didn’t like the idea.”

She peeped into Maidlin’s room, but Maidie lay sound asleep. Rosamund looked at her, with a sudden realisation of how pretty Maidie was growing.

As she crept downstairs, shoes in hand, she said to herself, “Maidie’s going to be a beauty. And she’s as rich as rich; all that Italian property Joy talks about. And a singer; her voice is really good, and she’s so frightfully artistic; what Jen calls temperamental! And yet she doesn’t want to be noticed, or to do anything alone, or anything startling. She’d like to hide in a corner, and dream for ever. Poor kid! It’s jolly hard for her. I wonder if we’re being brutes to tease her to be Queen? Brownie thought it would bring her out of herself; but we may be

wrong. Maidie's so difficult, with her temper and her shyness and all her queer little ways; and she tries so awfully hard to be better and more sensible. Perhaps she's got enough on her hands without being Queen," and she let herself out by the garden door and disappeared into the shrubbery.

"That was a queer dream I had," she said to herself in some discomfort, as she went along a narrow path. "It worried me. I believe I woke up because I was so annoyed. 'Course, if I hadn't wakened, I couldn't have come out, and the girls would have had to wait for me. They'd have been mad, but they couldn't have got in without me, and I shouldn't have had to decide what to do. Bother! Why was I so silly as to dream mad things? I don't usually dream at all."

But since she had wakened, thanks to the dream or not, the problem had to be faced. In the light of Mary's serious talk, and of Jen's trouble, Rosamund found her attitude changing towards the prank she had planned.

She glanced at her watch. "I've just time. And there's only one thing to do," and she went racing up the hill, among the trees, out on the grassy slopes, and along the hillside, without a glance at the wide view of plain, and woods, and fields, farms and cottages, spread below and reaching away into a blue haze in the west. Behind were the gardens and lake of Marchwood Manor; Maidlin had been nearly drowned in that pond, and Rosamund preferred not to look at it, even now, two years afterwards. Directly below her, the gray tower of the Hall stood among its woods, set in a ring of flowering trees, its orchard a sheet of white blossom; and close at hand, crouching snugly between the gardens and the dark woods, were the Abbey buildings, with their square of green in the centre, the cloister garth.

At a white gate on the hillside, Rosamund ran into a group of schoolgirls, three of them, of her own age and form.

"Cheers! Here she is at last! Didn't you wake up, Rose? Where's Maidie?" and they surrounded her eagerly.

"Asleep. I didn't wake her. Look here, girls, this stunt's off," and Rosamund faced them defiantly.

"Why?" There was a disappointed chorus, which quickly became one of indignation.

"You haven't brought us here at this time, just to back out now!" a tall girl said forcefully. "What's up, Rose? Have you turned funk?"

"I've never funked yet," Rosamund said hotly. "But I have thought better of it. Pat—Vi—Gertrude—listen! It was only to tease Jen I'd promised to let you into the Abbey by the secret passage. We thought it would make her so mad to know some one had done it under her very nose, while she felt in charge. But that's no use now; Jen isn't here. She heard last night that her mother had died suddenly, so Brownie's gone off to Glasgow. So, you see," she pleaded, "there's no point in this stunt now. It would be a mean trick when she isn't here. She'd just feel we'd taken a kiddish advantage of her absence. That's how I feel, and I can't go on with it. It isn't a game any longer. There's no sense in it now. Don't you all see that? I hadn't time to let you know."

There was an uncomfortable silence. The girls looked at one another. Rosamund's colour rose, and her chin tilted haughtily.

Then Pat said persuasively, "But it couldn't do any harm, Rose. We wouldn't have arranged it if we'd known, of course; but since we are here, couldn't we go in, just for the fun of the thing? We want to see the mysterious passage."

“We’ve got up hideously early,” Vi urged. “And it was jolly risky. My Dad wouldn’t like it. You might make it worth our while, now we’re here.”

“We’ve brought our grub, and some for you,” Gertrude coaxed. “Just let us slip into the Abbey and have our picnic, and then we’ll fade away. It won’t do any harm, Rosamunda!”

“It’s going behind Jen, and she’s down on her luck. I simply can’t,” Rosamund said steadily. “I’m awfully sorry I couldn’t put you off, but there was no time. We could have the picnic out here.”

“It’s no fun out here. And the grass is soaking. We couldn’t sit down.”

“Sit on the gate,” Rosamund suggested briefly.

“That’s never comfy. You fall off, or the food does. And think of a picnic sitting in a row! Be a good sort, Rose, and let us into the tunnel, anyway.”

Then the treacherous April sky, which had changed from sun to heavy cloud while they talked, let loose a sudden shower of drops. Consternation seized the group; they had not come prepared for this.

“We’ll be soaked! There’s no shelter for miles,” cried Pat. “Rose, you asked us here! You must let us under cover. Where is your tunnel?”

“Vi will have pneumonia if she gets wet,” Gertrude urged. “She always does; she’s had it twice.”

Very reluctantly, but feeling helpless, Rosamund led them racing across the hillside to a clump of hawthorn bushes. The girls wormed their way under the wet branches to a little hollow, where, set in the slope of the hill, was an old low door.

“How d’you open it? Do be quick, Rose! It’s pelting,” Pat urged.

Tight-lipped and unhappy, Rosamund plunged her hand into a tangle of leaves behind a primrose root, and drew out a flat tin case. In it was a key, which she fitted to the lock, and so opened the door.

In a moment the girls were within the passage, and were stumbling down the long stone staircase by the light of the torches they had brought.

Rosamund, pausing to close the door, called after them hotly, “Play the game, now, Pat! I let you in to shelter, because Vi’s delicate. There’s no need to go ramping all over the place.”

“Oh, we may as well see something now we’re here!” Gertrude called back, over her shoulder. Pat was already far ahead.

Rosamund groaned, and banged the door; she dared not leave it open. Then, torch in hand, she went leaping down the steps after the others.

The passage had been cleared of its rubbish-heaps, so the way was easy; but no amount of drainage had affected the underground spring, and presently, with a yell of dismay, Pat and Vi were in the pool.

“How simply beastly! I’m wet to my knees!” Pat fumed.

“Serves you jolly well right!” Rosamund had caught them up. “I’m glad you fell in. You were mean things to race off like that without me. You’re to come right back to the steps; you can picnic there, and shelter till the shower’s over. But you know I never meant you to go charging through the tunnels, and it isn’t fair of you to do it. You’re not going any farther.”

“Oh, yes, we are,” Pat assured her. “We’ve got to walk our feet dry. Don’t be an idiot, Rose! We’re going to see all there is to see.”

“Pat Mercer,” Rosamund shouted, suddenly realising her helplessness, “if you go another step, I’ll never speak to you again! You’re a cheat, and utterly mean. I hate you all!”

Pat, with a laugh, ran off down the passage, and the others followed her. “Old Rose has got her monkey up! But she’ll get over it; she’ll have to,” said Gertrude.

Rosamund stood, breathing quickly, incredulous that any one should be so wanting in honour. Then, walking steadily ahead, her face white and determined, she passed them, hesitating at the corner where the tunnel divided into two ways.

“Where does this path go, Rose?” Vi called, in a propitiatory tone.

Rosamund walked on and took no notice.

“Where are you going, Rose?” Pat’s voice had an anxious note.

Rosamund turned. “To the Hall, to fetch Miss Devine,” she said distinctly.

“Rose! You wouldn’t! You couldn’t!” Three startled voices cried after her.

Rosamund walked on, without looking round again. She was in front of them now, and as they started after her in dismay, she darted on ahead.

“Catch her, Pat! She mustn’t do it!” Vi cried nervously.

But it was not easy to catch Rosamund, and the way to the Hall was short. She knew every step of it, and the girls did not. Springing up the steps, she was through the door in time to bang it in Pat’s face.

She leaned against it to get her breath, unheeding the angry hammering on the inner side. Then this stopped suddenly; Gertrude had had the bright idea that they must be close to the house and that they might be heard.

In the silence Rosamund spoke clearly. “I’ll give you two minutes to turn and go right back the way you came. That side passage leads to the Abbey; I’m going to send some one there to look for you, unless I see you going straight out by the upper passage. You may sit on the steps till the rain stops, or till you get tired. It’s no use coming in here, for we’ll be waiting for you at both the doors. Now are you going?”

“Spoil sport!” cried Pat furiously.

“Cheat!” Rosamund responded amiably.

“I say, Rose, don’t be such a pig!” Vi pleaded.

“Are you going? Or am I to go on into the house? It’s only two steps from here, so you’d better not make a row. I expect you’ve wakened them all, as it is. Are you going?” Rosamund’s voice was hard.

“Look here, Rose, do listen!”

“I won’t listen to anything,” Rosamund cut her short. “I listened once, and you cheated me. I’ll never trust you again. Is that you, Maidie? I say, come here a sec, will you?”

She had heard fumbling at the door which opened into the big entrance hall by the secret panel. A shaft of light cut through the darkness of the passage, and then Maidlin, looking scared, and still in her dressing-gown, came flying to her down the tunnel.

Rosamund cautioned her to silence, and spoke again through the door. “Pat, Maidie’s here. If you don’t go at once, she’ll fetch Miss Devine and the maids. Now are you going to clear out?”

“I’ll never speak to you again, Rosamund Kane,” Pat said furiously.

“*I* said that to *you* some time ago,” Rosamund reminded her coldly. “I’d rather you didn’t, thanks all the same. You aren’t straight, and you haven’t a scrap of decent feeling among you. I’d much rather have nothing more to do with you.”

“We’ll all vote against Maidie,” cried Gertrude.

Rosamund looked at Maidlin’s bewildered face, and smiled unhappily. “Maidie’s been chosen already, thank you! But I don’t think she’s at all keen. Are you going?”

"Come on, Pat. We can't do any more," Vi urged.

"That's true. You've done enough," Rosamund flung after them.

She threw open the door and flashed her light on them.

"Now clear off quickly. I'm going to see you out of the place. I don't care how hard it's raining; you can shelter under the trees, or you can run. It'll dry your feet nicely. Maidie's going to keep an eye on us, and if you try any tricks, like getting into the Abbey, she'll bolt back to the house for help. Now get along!"

Crestfallen and furious, but helpless, the three turned and went gloomily along the tunnel. They were almost angry enough to attack Rosamund, but that would have been futile with Maidlin in the background, ready to fly for help. In the silence of utter discomfiture, and knowing themselves in the wrong and therefore doubly angry, they stumbled past the Abbey entrance, up the passage, across the pool, and on to the long flight of steps.

Pat was the leading spirit, and she knew herself beaten. She knew, too, that she had been more than foolish, and already was regretting bitterly the impulse which had led her to run on ahead when she first found herself in the secret passage. It had been a moment's impulse only; she was not naturally dishonourable, but she had yielded to the excitement and the desire to explore, and she had never dreamed "old Rose" would take the matter so seriously. She was ashamed of the part she had played; but she was not quite brave enough to say so.

So she walked quickly, holding her head high, and resenting at every step the knowledge that she was being driven out like a child in disgrace, that she deserved it. Rain was still falling, but Pat stalked out unheeding, and Vi and Gertrude followed in silence.

Rosamund's bitterness found vent in a final unnecessary but very human taunt. "We shall find a new place to hide the key. I shall lock the door on the inside, of course."

"We aren't burglars!" Vi flung back at her.

"Oh? I wasn't sure what you were," Rosamund said coldly, and banged the door and locked it.

Then she turned and fled back to Maidlin, who had followed her whispered instructions and kept well in the rear. "Maidie, you'll die of cold. You're only half dressed. Come on, run!"

"What happened, Ros?" Maidlin was shivering between cold and excitement.

"I'll tell you later. Come on!" and Rosamund seized her arm and ran with her down the passage, till they were both hot and breathless.

"I woke up dreaming," Maidlin panted, as they dropped to a walk, "and you'd gone. Then I remembered, and was getting dressed, when I heard a bang, and thumping, and it seemed to be downstairs. I woke Mary-Dorothy, and went to the panel door to see if you were there; and then you called from the passage."

"I'm jolly glad you came. It was the last straw, to Pat. I'll tell you presently; I'm tired to death." Rosamund had no understanding of the reaction that had seized her; she knew only that she was limp and ready to cry.

They reached the Abbey entrance at last, and here Rosamund paused. "I'm dead beat. Maidie, you go on and get dressed, and tell Mary what we'd planned, but that you didn't have anything to do with it. I'm going into the Abbey. I'll come after you presently."

And before Maidlin could plead or argue, she was off, racing up the side tunnel, up the steps, and out, brushing past the lilac bush, into the Abbey.

But the bare chapter-house, open to the garth, was no hiding-place for Rosamund just now. She was hurt too deeply, and was driven by a wild instinct to shelter out of sight. Always

happy, trustful, and used to being a favourite, she was hurt in her deepest nature, wounded to her soul; and she must get away from everybody.

She crept down the steps again, hardly knowing where she was going; and on, farther down, into the vaulted crypt, the lowest place she knew.

Here, under the Abbey, in the darkest corner, she crouched on the ground behind the Abbot Michael's tomb, and cried till she could cry no more, over the betrayal of her trust, and her lost faith. When Mary found her, some time later, she was still sobbing brokenly, shivering and exhausted.

Mary, startled by Maidlin's summons, had dressed hurriedly and was speeding down the passage when she met Maidie running back.

"Maidie! Where's Ros? What has happened? Oh, you aren't dressed, dear! Tell me quickly!"

"It's all right now, Mary. Ros is coming later," and hanging on Mary's arm, Maidlin poured out the story.

"We had a plan—it was silly, of course, but we meant it only as a joke, to tease Jen, Mary—we were to meet Pat Mercer, and Vi and Gertrude Browning, up on the hill at six o'clock. They were to bring food, and Ros and I were to let them into the Abbey by the secret entrance, away up there; we were to have a picnic breakfast in the Abbey, and Ros was going to take a photo of us doing it; and then we were going to show it to Jen, just to tease her and make her mad. She's so careful of the Abbey when Joan isn't here; yes, I know it wasn't right, and I see now it was silly, Mary. But we did mean it only as a joke, truly. There wasn't any harm in it. But, of course, we didn't want to tease her now; so Ros went to meet them, without telling me, and tried to put them off. She told me that much. I don't know what happened then. I heard thumping and went to see; and they were all in the tunnel, and awfully mad with Ros, because she was making them go out into the rain; and she was mad with them for something too. She said dreadful things to them, and so did they. They've gone now, and she's locked the door; and she's gone into the Abbey. She's frightfully upset, Mary. She didn't want to talk to me. Won't you go and see what's the matter with her?"

Mary looked at her anxiously. Time enough to call Rosamund to account later; Mary felt very indignant with her for bringing about this unnecessary trouble. But Maidlin, flushed and excited, was in danger of chill, in her scanty clothing in that underground place. Mary put everything else aside for the moment.

"I'll go and find Ros presently, Maidie. Run to your room and put on a jersey and skirt, and come to my room as quickly as you can," and she had the gas fire burning, and hot cocoa and biscuits waiting, when Maidlin returned.

"Sit here and get properly warm. Make more cocoa if you can take it, and finish those biscuits, dear. I'm going to fetch Rosamund."

She hurried away, anxious that Maidlin should have time to calm down; Maidie had seldom, to Mary's knowledge, said so much at one time before, unless it had been in whispered confidences to Joy. She was overwrought and highly excited, and needed a few minutes' quiet as much as she needed food and warmth.

Mary's thoughts of Rosamund, as she sought her in the Abbey, were full of bitter disappointment. Last night Rosamund had seemed so helpful, so full of promise; it had seemed possible to talk to her as a friend and not as a child. This morning's prank seemed so unnecessary and childish, so wrong in every way. Mary, as usual seeing it from her own point of view first, could have cried at the sudden loneliness that came over her. Once more she felt

alone with two children, as she had felt when Jen had had to go home in the summer; the night before she had felt that this time Rosamund might have grown enough to be a helpful companion, some one to consult, for Maidlin was undoubtedly a problem. As soon as she was assured that the intruders were safely out of the Abbey and that Maidie was warm and cared for, Mary's irritation against Rosamund, and her pity for herself in this disappointment, rose high.

But these thoughts vanished at sight of Ros, when at last she found her in the crypt, after searching in every other likely spot.

Rosamund lay exhausted on the stone floor of the vault, sobbing quietly, her arm on the broken pedestal of a pillar, her face buried in her sleeve, her long, yellow plaits drooping on the ground.

Mary's thoughts of herself fled before her fear and pity for the girl. "Rosamunda! Ros dear, what's the matter? Oh, Ros, tell me what has happened!" and she tried to lift her in her arms, but found herself too small and slight, for Rosamund was big and well-grown. "Ros, dear, you mustn't lie there. Do get up! I can't lift you."

"Oh, Mary, aren't people hateful?" Rosamund sobbed.

"Who is hateful? You'll have to tell me, dear."

Rosamund sobbed out the story. "I trusted them. I opened the door for them; and they took advantage. They cheated. Mary, do you know how it hurts?"

Mary's heart ached for her. She had not met just this trouble, but she knew what it was to give all and to find the trust had been given to one less worthy than she had thought. She knew all too well the heartbreak that came from a betrayal of confidence trustfully given; the shock of finding friends unworthy.

"Rosamunda, I think I do know. Come home with me, dear, and if you want to, we'll talk about it. But we can't talk down here. And I don't want to leave Maidie too long."

Rosamund rose at once. "I don't want to talk. There's nothing to say, is there? They cheated me. I'll never forgive any of them. Of course, it doesn't really matter. I could never like any of those three again. And I shall be jolly careful how I trust anybody at all after this."

There was a new note, almost of bitterness, in her tone. Mary, while her heart ached for her, felt horribly helpless. How was she to say the right word, to save Rosamund at this crisis? She felt the same desperate sense of need which had come when she longed to help Jen the day before.

"Ruth helped me," she thought anxiously. "Now surely I ought to be of some use to Rosamund? Have I got to turn to Ann Rowney for help again? I want to help Ros; but who can help *me*?"

"I'm tired," Rosamund said wearily. "Silly to be tired before breakfast! Mary, what's the matter with me? I"—she reddened in the dim light—"I've been howling for hours over this business. Why did it break me up like that? You know I never cry!"

Mary slipped her hand through her arm, and they went up the steps and through the tunnels together. "You had a shock, Rosie," Mary said very gently. "You've come up against an ugly thing, and it has hurt you. But you haven't thought clearly about it yet. You were very angry, weren't you?"

"Mad," Rosamund said briefly. "They tricked me. They let me down horribly. I was mad beyond words."

"It won't look quite so bad by to-morrow," said Mary, speaking from her own experience. "It won't go on hurting as it does now, Rosie. The hurt is partly anger, and that will get better.

I don't expect the girls meant so much harm as you thought. One has to make allowances for everybody."

"I can't, and I won't," Rosamund said shortly. "They went behind me. It was utterly mean."

Mary said nothing.

Rosamund looked at her, as they reached the panel door. "You don't approve of me, Mary-Dorothy? Don't you feel how beastly it was for me?"

"Absolutely," Mary said warmly. "I do sympathise, Ros. But I don't think for a moment those other girls had stopped to think what they were doing. They were excited, and they just didn't think. You know what you're like yourself. They were eager to get inside, and they took the chance. I don't see that you can quarrel with them for ever, on that account."

"I'll never forgive them," Rosamund said briefly. "I told them so."

"You won't go on feeling like that," Mary said hopefully, but feeling far less hopeful than she sounded. "After all, Ros, you had promised to let them in. You were right to change your mind, but you ought to allow something for their disappointment."

Rosamund turned to her quickly. "Mary-Dorothy, you're jolly decent! You haven't said one word to blame me for the whole thing. Mary, I am sorry; I apologise for the worry I've given you. It was a silly, baby trick to play. I saw it as soon as I thought it over this morning, but I couldn't leave the girls waiting for me, out there on the hill. I wish I had, now! I felt it would be letting them down so badly. And they let me down instead. I wish I'd left them there to shiver! But you've been awfully nice about it, Mary, and I am sorry. If you'll forgive me for the worry, there's no harm done—except in my feelings! I'll go and dress for breakfast," and she fled to her own room.

CHAPTER VIII
A TALK WITH NANCY

Ann Rowney sat in her attic above the apple orchard, and did some hard thinking—of herself—of the girls at the Hall—of Jen and her trouble. When it was time for her to go to the Hall, she set out hat in hand, rejoicing in the freshness of the woods after the morning's rain.

Rosamund, lying in a basket chair on the terrace, and looking half asleep, called a greeting. "Come and sit with me, Nancy! Mary-Dorothy will be here presently. We had Ken's message at night and Jen's wire this morning. She's arrived safely, and she sends very many thanks to you for your kindness and help yesterday."

"I didn't do anything to speak of." Ann sat on the stone seat placed against the house.

"I want Mary to show you the study Joy and Jen planned for her. She's quite willing, but she doesn't know if you'll care about it. I say that you'll want to tell your little sister where she writes her books."

"I'd love to see it!" Ann was saying warmly, when Mary and Maidlin came through the long window.

"Your green room, Mary. May we take Nancy up? Is it fairly decently tidy?" Rosamund asked. "I gave you warning I should invite her! She loves to show it off, Nancy. She's much prouder of her study than she is of her book."

"I don't see much reason for me to be proud of either," Mary remarked. "The study was planned for me and then given to me; and so, to be quite honest, was the book. I didn't make it. I've always said so."

Ann turned to her with quick interest, as they went upstairs. "Is that really how you feel?"

"She always says so. I don't know what she means," said Rosamund. "Says she *found* it, Nancy! Can you understand that?"

"I mean that I felt it was there all the time; not anything new. I happened to be the one who discovered it and wrote it down, that's all," Mary said, and opened her door, to show the green-walled room of her early dreams, with its green and blue pottery, its books and big chairs and desk, and its view of the sunny lawn and the beech drive.

"What a beautiful restful den! I should think you would 'find' books here!" Ann exclaimed.

"I love her other room better," and Maidlin went to the inner door. "May I, Mary? I'll show her mine later, and she'll see just how untidy I am."

"It's not too bad to-day," Mary said laughing, and stood in the background with gratified face, as Maidlin showed the brown and gold room, with the shining oddly-shaped brown pottery everywhere, the yellow curtains, the brown carpet and cushions.

"It's quite perfect," Ann said in delight. "May I tell Sybil all about it? How she'll love it!"

She was allowed to peep into the little blue room which had been Jen's ever since her first visit to the Hall when she was only thirteen; and into the big white bedroom which was waiting for the mistress of the house, Joy, Lady Marchwood. Maidlin showed her own room with a touch of pride; it was very dainty, with white walls and woodwork and furniture, and hangings of her favourite deep rose pink. Rosamund led the way through the open door into her room, whose colouring was a surprise to Ann, for the walls and hangings were in delicate

shades of lavender; something much more vivid would have seemed more natural for Rosamund.

"Did you choose it? It makes a pretty room," she asked curiously.

"Maidie says it's an old lady's colour. I don't care; I love it. Oh, yes, Joy let us choose, when the rooms were done up last year. Does it make you think of old ladies?" Rosamund challenged her.

"Not a scrap. It suggests sweet peas, and wisteria, and lavender fields."

"There, Maidie!" Rosamund triumphed.

"Old ladies have it in their bonnets," Maidlin insisted.

"Rosamund's choice was a surprise to us all," Mary said, as she went down to tea with Ann, the girls following. "You'd have expected her to want deep blue, or big rose-patterns, or bright green. She would have those delicate shades, though as a rule she wears bright colours."

"It's the expression of her other side," Ann said soberly. "Was she a little bit shy about her lavender and mauve at first? I thought so. It's her deeper self beginning to demand notice. Probably she is very sensitive, but she has covered it up so completely that you have never guessed it."

Mary looked startled, remembering that broken girl crying in the vault below the Abbey. "I hadn't realised till to-day that Ros had such very deep feelings. But this morning something happened; she was with some school friends, and they tricked her and betrayed her confidence. I was surprised at the effect it had on her. She cried till she was worn out and almost ill. I sent her back to bed instead of letting her go to church, and she went like a lamb, just saying she was very tired, and she says she slept all morning."

"I expect it nearly broke her heart," Ann said pitifully. "Poor kiddy! I thought she didn't look quite herself. It's always difficult to lose one's faith, and some natures take it very sorely."

Mary knew that very well. "But we hardly thought Rosamund was one."

"But have you known the real Rosamund—the whole of her? Remember that lavender room, her chosen private place, and her shyness in choosing it. It's her other side," Ann said again. "We all have our other side, the opposite of the one we show. Sometimes we manage to find ways to express it; sometimes we stifle it, and it comes up in our dreams."

"Dreams!" said Mary, a startled note in her voice. "I had a queer dream last night, and so had Ros. We were talking of them at breakfast. Ros," and she turned to the girls, who, arm-in-arm, were coming out on to the terrace, "tell Ann about your dream."

"It woke me," Rosamund said, in an injured tone, handing Ann her cup of tea. "It was too silly, Nancy; I woke up because it made me so cross. It was a sensible dream, not a jumble; that was the silly part of it; and yet it wasn't like me. I was starting on a journey, and I knew it was very important; I *had* to go. I suppose Jen's going off in such a hurry had started it. But I hadn't all the things I needed. I had my suitcase, locked and strapped, and I had my purse, and I had a bag, with lunch, and a book; and I had an umbrella, that I was sticking to as if my life depended on it. *That* was mad, for I loathe brollies, and never take one if I can possibly manage to forget it. But there were two things I hadn't got, and I couldn't find them, and I was fearfully worried; I wanted them very badly! One was my passport—I was evidently going abroad, and I knew I couldn't go without it; and the other was my map. I love to have a map on a journey; I always use the map when we're motoring. I couldn't find those two things, and

I was racing about wildly all over the place, looking for them. It was hectic! I woke up all hot and cross, without finding them."

Ann helped herself to bread and butter, looking interested but a little thoughtful. "Of course, you would be worried. Dreams like that are so real."

"Mary-Dorothy's was worse," Maidlin remarked.

Ann looked questioningly at Mary. "What were you all doing last night, to make you dream?"

"We didn't have anything fierce for supper," Rosamund said, in an injured tone. "But Maidie and I went to Mary's room and talked till an unearthly hour. She gave us cocoa, not coffee, so it couldn't be that."

"It was only half-past ten," Mary remonstrated. "My dream? Oh, it was sillier than Rosamund's! I was going into church, with one or two younger people; they might have been Ros and Maidie, but I didn't see them clearly. Everything in the church was wrong; I had no books to lend the others; I couldn't find our pew to take them to. I felt that I had brought them there and I ought to look after them, but I didn't seem able to do it. We tried seat after seat, but none would do. Worst of all, I wasn't dressed for church. My clothes were all wrong; I had on one dancing shoe and one walking shoe——"

Rosamund giggled. "You wouldn't walk very comfortably, Mary-Dorothy!"

"I was wearing a morning skirt and part of an afternoon frock," Mary went on seriously. "And I had on a sort of veil, that kept slipping down over my eyes, and getting in my way. And that was all. I woke up without anything satisfactory, books, or seat, or anything. But I felt quite definitely crushed and ashamed because I wasn't ready for church, and yet I'd taken two other people there with me."

"At least, it was a real dream, as real as mine," Rosamund remarked. "And just about as worrying, I should think. Now Maidie's always dreaming, but she can't tell us what it's all about; and yet sometimes she yells in her sleep."

Maidlin coloured; she was sensitive about her bad dreams. "I can't help it. I try not to."

Ann glanced at her. "Don't you remember the dreams, Maidie?" The name slipped out; her voice was full of sympathy. "Perhaps if you could tell Mary-Dorothy about them, they would stop bothering you."

Maidlin flushed again. "There's nothing real to tell. I don't dream story-things, like Mary and Ros. It's—it's something I'm looking at"—she struggled to find words. "Sometimes it's something so tiny that I can't even see it, but as quick as lightning it grows into something huge, that I'm frightened of. But oftener it begins big, and I'm afraid; and then it dwindles right away all in a moment; and I'm *more* afraid."

"I should think you'd be quite happy, if it goes away," cried Rosamund, staring.

"No, it's worse. It's—it's the sudden change from one thing to the other that frightens me," Maidlin quivered. "I don't understand it. I feel there's something uncanny, something nobody has ever known; and I'm terrified, and I cry; and then you come in. And I am so glad to see you!"

"And I put on the light, and crawl into your bed, and we talk and eat biscuits," Rosamund supplemented, and said nothing of how Maidie clung to her, and cried, and had to be soothed like a child. Maidlin was terribly ashamed of these breakdowns next morning, and Rosamund had never betrayed her to any one but Mary. She had felt it necessary to tell Mary, and Mary had told Jen; and the result had been a tonic for Maidie and more urging into the open air.

"Won't you take me round the Abbey again, Miss Devine?" Ann asked.

"I'm not going. Maidie, you stay with me here. We'll go and talk to Mrs. Shirley," said Rosamund. Her memory of that early morning in the Abbey was still too vivid for her to go there from choice.

Ann and Mary walked together across the lawn and down the shrubbery path to the Abbey gates, Ann very thoughtful. She was anxious to help and was sure help was needed; but she must find some way to begin.

Mary had only been waiting to get her alone, however. Her opinion of herself had never been high; she had often irritated Jen by her want of confidence in herself. Now that she had been forced to face a definite lack in her nature, she was eager for help from anybody.

As they wandered round the garth, she paused by one of the broken arches leading into the cloisters, and turned impulsively to Ann.

"Miss Rowney—may I call you Nancy, as the children do? It seems so soon, but I'd like to. Thank you so much! Nancy, will you help me?"

"Will you let me help?" Ann said eagerly. "I couldn't help seeing yesterday, Miss Devine ____"

"Oh, you must play fair! They call me by my whole name, Mary-Dorothy; after the dance, Jenny-Wren says! Oh, did you see? I couldn't help Jen, and she had to turn to you, a stranger. I'd give my life for her," Mary said hurriedly, "but I didn't know what to say. I knew all the ordinary things, but they wouldn't have sounded real. I know why it was. I've never thought deeply, on my own account. I've always shirked; it's been so easy. I go off into day-dreams, you know," and she looked at Ann. "Do you understand?"

"I should think I do!" Ann sat on a low piece of wall and gazed across at the three arches of the chapter-house; and Mary sat down beside her. "I do it too," Ann said briefly. "But I've learnt to keep it in its place. It used to run away with me. Then I got shaken up; my father died, and though he'd married again, I'd lived at home and he'd been everything to me. I went away to live in rooms; it was three years ago, and I was twenty-five. I felt I'd lost everything in the world that mattered; there was nothing left to live for. And I found I had no opinions, no convictions, nothing to rest on. I'd lived an easy life, and I'd dreamt dreams and drifted along. There was nothing solid beneath me. I used to dream of the big things I was going to do; I knew what I wanted to be. But I never made a start. And then I came up against the truth, that there was nothing to start on; nothing in me. I'd depended on father, taken his opinions, asked his advice. *I* wasn't there at all. I was just his shadow."

"And what did you do?" Mary whispered.

"I thought and thought. There seemed to be no one to help me and no way to get help. I hadn't any one to turn to; I just felt helpless. But I wanted help. And then one day I realised that God could help me," Ann said simply. "And so I asked Him to; I told Him I didn't know even how to begin to think, and I asked Him to teach me. It seemed common sense."

"Yes," Mary said, in a low voice. "The best common sense there is. I thought something like that in the night. And what happened?"

"Well, I thought it couldn't be right to ask to be helped and not to do anything myself. That didn't seem sense! So I began trying to think, and to make up my mind about things. I began with father, as he was the part of my life I'd just lost; and I asked myself what I really believed about where he was now, and if I'd see him and mother again; and I worked out what was real in my thoughts and what was just copied from what I'd heard people say. I began to find it wasn't so hard to think; and that there were things I did believe. I hung on to them, and I kept finding more, until I became sure that God really was guiding my thoughts and helping

me. It came slowly; I was at college at the time and studying hard, and I hadn't much time. But I managed to read a little, books that I couldn't have looked at before, because they'd have bored me stiff."

"I haven't time for real reading," Mary said quickly. "Between my own writing, and correcting proofs, and Lady Marchwood's business, and her letters and my own, and Ros and Maidie, and Mrs. Shirley and the house——"

"I know," Ann laughed in sympathy. "You're so tired that when you do get half an hour to yourself, you want a novel."

"And the sillier the better, sometimes," Mary added. "If it doesn't need any thinking about, it's such a rest!"

"I've been just there," Ann nodded. "But suppose the book was on some subject that really fascinated you! You'd read it just as eagerly as any novel."

"I want to help Ros and Maidie. If you could give me any book that would help me with them, I'd read it fast enough," Mary said wistfully. "I don't like those nightmares of Maidie's. She has the same thing often. What would you do about it?"

"She's afraid of the unknown, of change," Ann said soberly. "She's growing up, and her deepest self is afraid, and wants to stay as she is. I should talk to her gently about grown-up life, and make her see it as a thing to hope for and to glory in; perhaps the fear will go, and the dream with it. But Maidie's an artist, and deeply sensitive; she's afraid of being hurt; she can't help it," Ann explained. "She's so responsive that every little thing moves her deeply. You'll find that she cares too much about trifles. Aren't you the same yourself?" and she turned quickly on Mary.

Mary coloured hotly. "I'm a silly idiot. Jen often tells me so, and laughs at me."

"Never mind; you know she doesn't mean it. That's the part of you that wrote your book; and your book made my young sister, who is a dreadful pickle, say she was going to try 'real hard' to be as nice as the jolly girls in the story. But, Mary-Dorothy, you're the one to help Maidlin just now. She worships Lady Marchwood, of course; will she get help and understanding from her? Is Lady Marchwood the same type—sensitive and sympathetic and artistic?"

Mary thought of Joy. Then she said, very gravely, "Nancy, Joy was meant to be all that. She's musical, and has even composed a little; she really is an artist. Look at those beautiful rooms she planned for me! But all her life she has had everything; happiness all the way; she has never had to fight, for herself, or for any one else. Things seem to drop into her lap. And she hasn't quite grown the sympathy you speak of. She misunderstands people, and is desperately sorry for it afterwards. There's just a little something she needs. Perhaps we'll find she has gained it since her marriage. We all love her; everybody does. And she has never had trouble with the people she really loves; Mrs. Shirley or Joan, Jen or Maidie. I think she understands Maidie."

"Obviously, there has been trouble between My Lady and Mary-Dorothy," Ann said to herself, much interested. "But Mary has forgiven it. She hasn't forgotten, though. I see," she said aloud. "You've drawn her exactly. She'll help Maidlin, if there's sympathy between them; but you may find Maidie needs you too. Both the girls need you. Rosamund will have to learn that you don't turn away from your friends because you've lost faith in them. She'll be tempted to do that. Can't you help her there?"

Mary coloured again, thoughts of Joy and herself in her mind once more. "Is that why things happen to us?—so that we'll be ready to help other people when they get into the same

fix?"

"You can only show the road if you've been along it yourself first," said Ann, and rose. "I ought to go. The girls at the hostel are all jealous because I've been here to tea each day since I came."

"Oh, don't go!" Mary cried. "There are so many things I want to ask!"

Ann laughed. "My dear, I can't answer you. I don't know very much. Every one must find her own answers. I'll give you the names of some books, if you like, but even that isn't much use. Your books won't be my books; any more than my need is your need. We're all so different. But there's the right help waiting for every one. We have only to ask; and then to take it. But don't ask, and then sit down and wait. That's no good. Get busy about it yourself; believe you've got the thing you've asked for, and begin to try to use it. I believe that's what opens the door. You'll find you've had your answer. Don't come with me. Those girls will be wanting you," and she left the Abbey by the gateway to the woods.

CHAPTER IX
ANN'S NEW JOB

Mary, filled with new ideas, shut herself into her study for a few quiet moments.

Her deep thought was broken by a tattoo on the door and Rosamund's voice calling her name. "Mary-Dorothy! I say, Cook's in floods of tears, and Grace is worse. Let me in, and I'll tell you."

Mary opened the door, resenting the interruption and the sudden jarring descent to earth. "Whatever's the matter, Ros?"

"They've had a wire. Their mother's very ill; she lives in London. Cook says one of them must go at once, and she'd like to, and she thinks Grace can manage without her for a day or two. Shall I say she can have the car as far as Wycombe?"

"Yes, certainly. But she must make arrangements to come back here quickly," Mary was disturbed and anxious. "We can do without her for a day or so; but we'd need her if Joy came home."

"I'll tell her. Oh, we'll be all right! We can live on tinned meat and tea," Rosamund said cheerfully.

"It won't be as bad as that. Grace and Kate aren't helpless, nor am I," Mary retorted.

"Oh, you haven't time. Look at those mountains of proofs! Grace will buck up if she knows Cook's gone to help at home," and Rosamund went off to urge on Cook's packing and to offer the car.

Mary made no effort to recapture her thoughtful mood at the moment; she knew, from experience in story-planning, that the broken chain of thought would be taken up again later. It returned, as she had expected, when Ros and Maidie had been dismissed to bed, without any cocoa-party. "Not after the way you dreamt last night. It evidently didn't suit you," Mary told them, to Rosamund's indignation.

Alone in her brown and gold room, Mary sat before the gas fire, and went off all unconsciously into a dream, of herself helping Ros and Maidie, helping Jen, helping Joy, with wisdom and the right kindly word for everybody at the right moment. It was as vivid a dream as her old-time romances had been; but it was more hopeful, in that there was some possibility of its fulfilment. It was the building of an ideal; a dream she had had before, but clearer now, thanks to Ann Rowney's quiet words.

Ann went thoughtfully homewards, hoping she had spoken wisely, a little afraid, when she thought it over, lest she might have said too much.

"One thing's quite certain," she said to herself, as she leaned out of her attic window above the apple-trees and bluebells, "I've gone too far in friendship with these nice people to be able to leave them without explanations. I'll have to own up. I'd never feel honest if I didn't speak out. As for—what I came here for—it's more than out of the question. I can't see how it ever seemed possible at all. I shall have to confess to Mary-Dorothy Devine; and she'll tell Jen Robins for me," and, thinking over the matter soberly, she prepared for bed.

Quite definitely and of set purpose, Ann avoided any private talk with Mary during the next few days. She knew the need for Mary to do her own thinking, and, without knowing anything of Mary's strong tendency to rely on any opinions other than her own, she yet saw that Mary wanted to ask questions, and was careful to give her no chance to do so. If Mary

came down to the hostel, Ann was out in the woods with Norah and Con; or all the girls were off to the hills together for a picnic. Ann met Ros and Maidie among the beeches and went for a walk with them, chattering on any and every subject; she watched Rosamund teach the mid-week class of village children their morris steps and movements; she came to tea at the Hall again and heard Maidie sing; but she steadily avoided private talk with Mary.

At first Mary thought it merely chance. Then she realised what was happening; and instantly gave up trying to see Ann alone. A little hurt, she retired within herself, and found comfort in her own thoughts and day-dreams.

Ann saw, at first amused and sympathetic, and then worried. "How fearfully difficult these thin-skinned people are! It must be awfully uncomfortable for themselves. But I couldn't let her go on; she'd have come to me with new questions every day, and have taken everything I said for truth. What's true for me may not be true for her; not all of it, anyway. We each have to find our own way. I can't hold her hand! But I'd better be extra jolly to her, or we sha'n't end up anywhere near being friends. And I mean to be friends!"

In pursuance of this intention, she went uninvited to the Hall, just a week after her arrival, on the excuse of a message from Mrs. Colmar to Mary, and begged that a promise made by Rosamund should be carried out, of a picnic above the white cross on the hill at Whiteleaf.

Rosamund agreed with enthusiasm, and fairly carried Mary and Maidlin along with her by her eagerness. Lunch was hurriedly packed and stowed in the car, and they set out, Ros and Ann in high spirits, Mary a trifle shy and reserved, Maidlin as usual inclined to be passive and to let Ros be excited for them both.

"It's so easy to have picnics just now," Rosamund said gaily. "We're hardly eating anything; just bread and butter, and sardines and things in tins. It's just as easy to take them out with us; and they'll taste much better up on the hill."

"Ros, what rubbish!" Mary remonstrated, laughing. "Grace is really doing very well. You've nothing to complain of."

"Oh, I wasn't grousing. I don't mind a scrap. But the village is running out of tinned stuff. Mary-Dorothy's had to send a huge order to Wycombe, Nancy."

"You make it sound as if you'd had nothing but tinned food for a week," Mary said indignantly. "You look very well on it, Rosamunda."

"Haven't had much else. We tried Grace's pastry once," Rosamund explained. "But only once! Now we prefer tinned peaches and custard."

"Better let me come and cook for you," Ann said laughing. "I can do quite a lot, really."

"Oh, do! You could wear Cook's dresses and caps and aprons, and we'd call you Annie."

"I doubt if I could stand being called Annie, and I know I couldn't wear Cook's frocks," Ann said gravely.

"I've thought of something so funny," Rosamund proclaimed, as she helped to spread the feast on the grass. "You're A. Rowney, aren't you?"

Ann sat on her heels and gazed up at her. "I suppose I am! Well, child?"

"Ros is about seven to-day," Maidlin remarked. "Not seventeen."

"Well, Jenny-Wren's 'B-rownie,' isn't she? And when she was Queen she was 'C-rownied'; A.B.C. You must be one of the family," Rosamund said triumphantly.

"If you're so frightfully funny, somebody will want to 'D-rowny' you, Rosamunda," Mary said seriously.

"Cheers! Keep it up!" Rosamund cried. "There's Maidie looking 'F-rowny,' because she thinks I'm mad. And—and Jenny-Wren and I are 'G-rowny,' and none of the rest of you are.

Little skimpy people you are, Mary-Dorothy and Nancy. I don't think we can go any further. —Hello!"

Her change of tone was so sudden and complete, as she rose to her feet, that the other three turned in astonishment. Rosamund had grown white; her gaiety had gone, and her eyes were hard.

Three schoolgirls were running up the slope towards them. Ann and Mary looked at one another.

"It's Pat and the Browning girls," whispered Maidlin.

Pat Mercer's conscience had been troubling her all week. She was ashamed, and she wanted to say so, but her courage and her resolution had failed her at thought of going to the Hall and asking for Rosamund and perhaps being repulsed. Here was an easy way to end the trouble before term began. She, Vi, and Gertrude had been primrosing when Vi had spied the picnic party, and after much discussion the trio had worked up their courage to the point of an apology.

They ignored the strangers in the group, and walked straight up to Rosamund, who stood, more erect and with colder face than Mary would have believed possible. Maidlin sat nervously plaiting blades of grass; she had no doubt as to what Ros would say. Mary and Ann watched, and held their breath.

"I say, Rose!" Pat shrank and stumbled under Rosamund's hard stare, "we're awfully sorry about Sunday morning; honestly we are. We didn't think what we were doing. You—you aren't going to be a pig about it and bear a grudge, are you? We've come to apologise."

But Rosamund had been hurt in her deepest soul, and the wound was still new, though she had been able to cover it up successfully in everyday life. Maidlin, who had heard her talk at night, knew how sore she felt.

"You ought to be sorry," she said curtly. "You're not straight, any of you. I'll never trust you again. I don't want to talk to you. I've no use for any of you," and she turned and walked away into the bushes behind the picnic camp.

Maidlin sat looking down; she was too loyal to Rosamund to say a word of friendship, but she did not know how to face Pat and the rest without it.

Mary sprang up. "Rosamund!"

"It's no use," said Ann.

"Oh, please don't call her back!" Pat said haughtily. "*We* don't want to see her again. I don't say I'm sorry twice," and she walked away, Gertrude and Vi following in unhappy silence.

Their gloom was as nothing to that which had fallen on the picnic group. For several moments no one spoke; then Maidlin rose, and sped away to find Rosamund.

Mary was nervously rearranging the dishes on the tablecloth. She looked up at last, and turned to Ann, who sat clasping her knees and gazing out over the flat country far away below.

"What am I to say to her, Nancy? This is too hard for me. It's the first trouble we've had."

"I shouldn't say anything," Ann said at once. "It would only do harm. She'll expect you to row her. Ignore it, and be gentle with her; she's desperately unhappy. She'll very likely come to you for advice in time. What can you say? She knows she's put herself in the wrong. No need to rub it in; it would only get her back up. I should wait. Ros has too much good in her to go on like this for ever; she's probably crying her eyes out now. But she's been very badly hurt; you must give her time to get over it. But when she does come to you, you must be

definite and give her a strong lead. She won't come till she's ready for it. If you can help her out of your own experience, so much the better. You'll speak with more weight behind you."

"I feel things are getting too difficult for me," Mary said despondently. "You know what's right, in every puzzle that comes along. I don't."

Ann spoke out quickly. "You can know just as well as I can. *I* can't help you, Mary-Dorothy. There are things we all of us have to do for ourselves. You've thought me brutal all this week; I've seen it. But you have to go ahead alone."

"I've tried to think," Mary said quickly. "But I don't believe I do it. I believe I only dream. I think how nice things would be if——; and I build castles in the air; but I don't do anything to make them real."

Ann thought for a moment before answering soberly. "It's specially hard if you've much imagination, I think. It so easily runs away with you. You have to get control. I expect that's your danger-point; we all have one. But it's also the point where we can get most help, just because it's our weakest spot. Now what are we going to do about these girls? You've got your hands full, with them both at such difficult stages."

"I feel quite the wrong person. I'm not fit to help them," Mary said despondently.

Ann, standing looking about for some sign of Ros and Maidie, whirled round on her. "Then ask for help. Nobody has to carry on without help. It's absurd to try to tackle a job like this alone. But it is your job; so there must be help waiting for you. I've done all I can. I'm going to find them," and she went off into the woods.

Mary, alone on the hillside, faced the fact of her own unfitness for the task laid upon her; and quite definitely prayed for help. Later, she wondered if perhaps that was the first real prayer she had ever framed.

She heard Ann's voice calling—"I say, you two! The sandwiches are getting hard, and the butter's melting, and there are ants on the cake and spiders in the jam. Mary-Dorothy and I are going to start; if you don't come soon, we'll have finished the ginger-ale."

"I want some ginger-ale, and I don't want you two to be greedy," and Rosamund appeared from behind a hawthorn bush. Her eyes were red, but Ann did not seem to see. "Come on, Maidie, or they'll be making pigs of themselves."

Ann would not endure a silent meal. She claimed the fulfilment of a promise that during lunch Rosamund should tell her all about the Hamlet Club, which had taken its first badge from the great white cross of chalk beside them, and which had crowned Joan and Joy, Jen and Rosamund herself as Queens.

But though Rosamund responded, and hid her feelings bravely, her high spirits had gone, and she was the one to propose an early return to the Hall.

"We've had lunch out, and you've seen the Cross. Those are the things we came for," she said. "No one seems exactly excited about this picnic, so I vote we go home. I want to write to Biddy and Brownie."

Ann stood on the terrace talking to Maidlin for a few moments when they reached the house. Maidie was never talkative, but two subjects could always unloose her tongue—Joy, or her singing. She was telling shyly about her weekly lessons in Oxford, when, with a shout, Rosamund came dashing out of the house, her troubles forgotten.

"Joy! To-morrow, or Sunday!" she shouted.

"Oh, Ros!" gasped Maidlin, and turned white.

"A telegram! And—oh, tell them, Mary! There's one from Jen, too!" Rosamund cried joyfully. "*She's* coming to-night. Ken's driving her from town. To-night, Maidie!"

"And Joy to-morrow!" Maidlin's voice was tremulous with joy and almost with awe. "Joy, really home again!"

Mary came hurrying out, her face full of distress. "Girls! Nancy! What shall we do? This is no joke! Kate was waiting to tell me that Grace had a letter from Cook at midday, saying she had had an accident and had upset a kettle of boiling water over her foot. She's helpless and in bed, and the mother is still very ill. And Grace has simply packed a bag and gone off to help, without even waiting to ask. Of course, you can understand her feeling. But what *are* we going to do?"

"My hat! And Joy coming to-morrow! Golly, what a mess!" said Rosamund expressively.

Ann sat on the terrace seat and watched them all intently, her bright eyes eager. The crisis reduced Maidlin to a state of bewildered dismay, but Rosamund was already tackling the problem, and Mary braced herself to face it also; it was too imminent to be postponed even for an hour.

"What can we do? We shall have to get help somewhere. Joy must come home to a comfortable house."

"Kate isn't an atom of use for cooking. Might as well depend on me or Maidie," said Rosamund. "I should give Cooky and Grace both the sack and get new people. They've let you down horribly."

"Joy wouldn't wish that. They've been here for years. She wouldn't turn them down when they're in trouble. But we must have temporary help. I'd better drive into Wycombe. But think—oh, just *think*!" cried Mary, in distress. "Think of having strange girls about the house when Joy comes home! Girls who won't know our ways or anything! And two of them at once!"

"Yes, it is jolly awful," Rosamund admitted, unconscious of the absurdity of her words. "But we must have somebody to cook, Mary. I'll dust and sweep and all that, with pleasure; but I don't *think* Joy would like my cooking!"

"I wonder," Mary began slowly, "I wonder if there's any one in the village—can you think of anybody, Ros?"

"Not Mrs. Watson, from the Abbey!" cried Rosamund apprehensively. "I'm certain she can only fry chops, even if she is Maidie's aunt!"

"She doesn't set up to be a cook," Maidlin said simply. "She's a caretaker."

"I wonder if Nell Bell—but she can't cook," Mary said hopelessly. "I've heard her say so. It will have to be an outsider. I'd better go to the Wycombe registry offices. You two must explain to Jen, if she comes before I get back."

"I say, Mary," Rosamund called after her, "I suppose there wouldn't be any girl staying at the hostel who could take on the job? You could ask Mrs. Colmar. Some of them may be able to cook."

"But they'd lose their jobs in town——"

Ann Rowney stood up. "Well, there's me; I mean, I'm here. I can cook. And I'm not quite a stranger. I *can* cook, really. Wouldn't you try me?" she said.

The distraught household turned to her; Mary incredulous; Rosamund, eager and delighted; Maidlin, hopeful. So long as Joy was fed, and was pleased and comfortable, Maidie did not care who did the work.

"Would you? Oh, *would* you, Nancy?" cried Rosamund.

"But what about the typing office?" Mary faltered. "We might very well need you for several weeks. You couldn't lose your job just for us."

“I’m not worrying about my job. I’ll tell you something about it later on,” Ann said briefly. “I was a cook before I was a typist; I mean, I had some Domestic Science training. I love cooking. Didn’t I tell you so, the first morning I was here?” she challenged Mary. “I meant it. Mary-Dorothy, let me cook, and ask Nelly Bell to take Grace’s place. We’ll get on splendidly.” Her eyes were bright and eager, and she spoke earnestly.

“If you would!” Mary said fervently. “But it doesn’t seem fair to let you. Of course, we’d all love to have you. Jen and Joy would appreciate it very much.”

“We’ll love you for ever!” Rosamund cried exuberantly. “But I *shall* call you Annie!”

CHAPTER X
JEN COMES HOME

Jen's first question, as she sprang out of Kenneth Marchwood's car, was, "Has Joy come? Am I in time?"

"Coming to-morrow," Rosamund cried jubilantly, as Maidlin leapt into Jen's arms with the same glad news. "Oh, Brownie, it is topping to have you home again! We've been flying round all afternoon getting ready for you." The urgent need to help in the preparations had been the greatest relief to Rosamund; it had given her the way of escape from troublesome, and in this case guilty thought which she had sorely needed.

"It *is* 'home again' now," Jen said gratefully, as she turned to Mary. "We went to The Grange for a few days, and I shall have to go back to see to heaps of things; but it didn't seem like home any more. And I could never feel Harry's house was 'home,' though he and Alison are always very kind. But this dear place is far more of a home to me now than any other. I hope it will be my home till Ken and I make a new one for ourselves."

"Which we mean to do *very* soon," Kenneth said promptly. "But we won't discuss it out here."

Jen laughed. "Mary-Dorothy, aren't you going to invite him in to dinner?"

"Of course, we're expecting you," Mary smiled up at Kenneth. "You didn't bring Lady Marchwood with you?"

"No, mother's staying in town a little longer," and he carried Jen's luggage into the hall.

"It will be jolly awkward when Joy comes, and we have two Lady Marchwoods," Rosamund remarked. "Come and have dinner at once, Jen! We waited for you. We do hope you'll enjoy it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" Jen asked, very naturally.

Rosamund's eyes were dancing, and she deliberately winked at Maidlin. "Oh, you will. We're quite sure you will!"

"Did you cook it?" Jen asked suspiciously. "Ken, there's some joke about this dinner. I think you'd better go to the Manor."

"Oh, he'd get only bread and cheese there!" Rosamund cried anxiously.

"I'll risk it. My digestion's fairly good," Kenneth said gravely.

Jen threw off her coat and little close, black hat, and put her arm round Maidlin and led her into the dining-room.

"What's wrong with the dinner, Maidie? Has Rose-of-the-World put sugar in the soup and salt in the pudding?"

Maidlin's eyes had filled at sight of the black dress Jen wore. She squeezed the arm around her in silent sympathy, and shook her head. "I'm sure it's nice, Jenny-Wren."

"We'll tell you after you've criticised it, Brownie. Don't ask too many questions!" Rosamund ordered. "I say, I can't call her Brownie, can you, Mary-Dorothy? 'Goldy' or 'Canary,' if you like. What has she done to her hair? It's yellower than it used to be."

"Goldilocks," Kenneth said promptly. "The Three Bears!—Father Bear!" and he pointed at Rosamund. "Mother Bear!—Miss Mary. Baby Bear—Madalena! Very good soup, anyway. Don't you agree with me, my dear?" in an elderly tone to Jen.

"It's delicious. But it ought to be porridge, in the Three Bears' house," she said lightly, conscious of all the approving eyes upon her, for Rosamund's prophecy of six months before, that she would "look lovely in black," was fulfilled to the letter.

"All I can say about this dinner," she announced presently, "is this—either I was *very* hungry, or you've sent Cook somewhere for lessons, or some one else cooked it. If so, she's a decided improvement. Not you, surely, Mary-Dorothy? What has happened?"

Mary laughed, but seconded Rosamund ably. "Wait till we've had coffee. Perhaps that will spoil the rest," she said.

"It doesn't. It's perfect coffee. Kate, what is it all about?" Jen demanded of the maid who was waiting on them in the drawing-room afterwards.

Kate laughed, and looked at Mary.

"We've got a new cook. We've got two new maids!" Rosamund proclaimed excitedly. "Would you like to see them? They only came this afternoon!"

Jen looked at Mary in dismay. "Whatever's happened?"

"I'll fetch them!" and Rosamund whirled away. "Don't tell her, Mary!"

Mary explained quickly. "Cook and Grace have had to go to nurse their mother. I gave Cook leave, and she went on Sunday. Then Grace went off to-day, without asking anybody. We were having a picnic, and only heard when we came home at three o'clock, at the same time that we had your wire and the news from Joy."

Jen whistled. "What a pickle! I am so sorry! And what did you do? Have you had to get in strange people? Oh, Mary! Joy won't like that!"

Rosamund threw open the door dramatically. "The new cook!" she announced triumphantly. "It was a good dinner, wasn't it? Three cheers for Nancy! Speak up, everybody! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

Ann, flushed and laughing and bright-eyed, stood in the doorway, wearing a big pink overall over her dark dress. While Rosamund cheered wildly, and Mary and Maidlin broke into enthusiastic applause, Jen leapt forward to seize the new cook's hands.

"Nancy! Really? You? But how sweet of you! Ken, it's Ann Rowney, who was so good and helped me so much; I told you about her. Nancy, come and be introduced! This is Mr. Marchwood. Now tell me all about this, somebody! No, not all at once, please. Can't you take turns?"

"Nancy offered," Rosamund cried eagerly. "She was here; she'd been to the picnic—we took her to Whiteleaf, Brownie. She saw we were in a hole, and she offered to help. Said she could cook; and she *can*!"

"Nelly Bell's there too, to do Grace's work," Maidlin added.

"She's washing up," said Ann. "She wouldn't come. You don't mind, do you?" to Jen. "Truly, I shall enjoy it. I'll carry on as long as you need me. Will Lady Marchwood mind? I am a stranger to her, of course."

"Mind? She'll be more than grateful. But ought you to do it, Nancy? What about your own job?" Jen asked anxiously.

Mary whispered to Maidlin, who sped away, and returned with an extra cup.

"My job will be all right. Don't worry about that," Ann was saying to Jen, when Maidlin touched her elbow and offered the coffee.

"You must try our new cook's coffee," Mary said, in a bright friendly tone.

Rosamund took the cue at once. "She makes such delightful coffee, Nancy. Do sit down! Such a charming girl, my dear, a perfect treasure! Such a bit of luck to find her like that! And

so original; what did you think of that pudding? Most unusual and delicious, wasn't it?"

Ann, laughing and embarrassed, was trying to escape. "I must go and help Nelly."

"Oh, no, you don't! Kate will do all that!" and Rosamund barred her way. "We'll be awfully much obliged to you if you'll make puddings for us; but when you aren't cooking, I guess 'friend of the family' is your stunt, isn't it, Mary?"

Jen took her by the arms and placed her in a big chair. "When I do that, Nancy, you're as helpless as Mary-Dorothy is. There are points about being a big and hefty person! Here's your coffee, and we're very glad to see you, and the dinner was tophole. Now don't argue any more. Tell me all about everything, everybody!"

"I think you should do the telling. You've been to Scotland," Rosamund said thoughtlessly.

"What kind of journey did you have, Brownie?" Mary asked quickly.

"I've only come from Yorkshire to-day," Jen said gravely. "Ken met me in town and brought me here by car, which was nice of him. I shall have to go back to The Grange, to settle up all sorts of things; but I felt I must come here to see Joy first. The house is to be mine now; father left it to me, but it was to be mother's first. The boys all have their own homes. I can't make up my mind what to do with it. I love the old place; but I suppose Ken and I will be living abroad a good deal. It needs thinking out. It would make a beautiful home, for holidays for city girls and tired people, if we decide not to live there. I've got as far as that."

"What a beautiful idea!" Ann and Mary spoke together. Both knew what a boon such a home could be.

"Oh, I sha'n't shut it up; it must be used somehow. I couldn't bear to waste it," Jen said decisively. "I say, do tell me! What has happened to the village classes all this week? Did you take them for me, Mary-Dorothy?"

"No, but somebody else did," Mary said.

"Ros took them, Brownie," Maidlin cried eagerly.

Rosamund, in a sudden attack of shyness, was very busy collecting cups on the tray. She looked up, flushed and laughing. "They got on all right, Jenny-Wren. I don't think we did anything wrong."

"Ros, how topping of you!" Jen said warmly "What fun! I wish I'd been there to see!"

"I'm jolly glad you weren't. But it was fun," Rosamund admitted. "I loved it. I'd like to take them again sometime."

"Oh, you shall! But you won't have time after term begins next week, I suppose."

Rosamund's face clouded, and she turned away quickly and carried off the tray.

"What's the matter with her?" Jen asked, in surprise. "She's usually so keen on school. Oh, is it you, Maidie? Aren't you going to be Queen, after all?"

"It isn't that," Mary said quickly. "I'll tell you later."

"In your room," Jen nodded. "I'm coming to sit on your fender to talk secrets."

"For the last time," Mary smiled, so naturally that the effort it cost her was almost hidden. "To-morrow night you'll be sitting with Joy. What a lot she'll have to tell!"

"Oh, well! She may not want me. She'll have Andrew, you know. It won't be quite the same as in the old days. We're all prepared for that," Jen said sensibly.

They sat talking till it was time for Kenneth to go on to the Manor. No one noticed Maidlin slip away, nor realised at first that Rosamund had not come back.

But when Kenneth had driven away, Mary turned to look for the girls, to suggest bed, in view of the excitement expected next day; and then it dawned on her and Jen that Ros and

Maidie had not been seen for some time.

"Perhaps they've gone to bed," Ann suggested.

"It wouldn't be like them. But I'll look," and Mary hurried upstairs.

She came down again, looking worried. "They aren't there, or with Mrs. Shirley. Can they have gone out into the garden? How odd of them!"

A hasty search through the lower rooms and kitchens showed that the truants were not in the house. Thoroughly disturbed, the three elder girls went out to search the gardens, calling as they went.

"They can't have gone far! It's not an hour since we saw them," Jen argued, annoyed because she was tired and anxious.

"Rosamund may have thought we'd be telling about her and Pat Mercer. She's feeling very unhappy about it," said Mary. "She may not want to face you, Jen. Pat upset her, and then came to say she was sorry; but Ros wouldn't, or couldn't, listen, and told her so."

"And now she's feeling bad about it," Ann said briefly, as they hunted through the shrubbery.

"Or something may have upset Maidie," Mary added. "She's very difficult just now. I never know how she'll take anything."

"She's off her head with excitement about Joy, and because she can't show it, she's nervy and on edge," Jen said at once. "She wants to dance and shout and turn somersaults, but she can't let herself go. I could believe anything of Maidie in her present state of suppressed thrills."

"Jen! Brownie! Is that you?" It was Rosamund's voice, calling from the Abbey gateway.

Jen and Mary and Ann all ran to her. She took Jen by the arm. "Come and talk sense to Maidie. She met me in the house, and I saw something was up. She said you'd said Joy might not want us, and it wouldn't be the same as in the old days, because of Andrew being there. Then she dashed off into the garden, and I went after her and hauled her into the Abbey, because the grass is wet. Do come and bring her back!"

"Good for you, Ros! Where is she? Poor infant!" and Jen hurried away with Rosamund.

"How absurd! But how like Maidie!" Mary exclaimed.

"It's like Maidie, but it's not absurd. It's serious," said Ann gravely. "She's up against a tragedy, if she really hadn't realised that Lady Marchwood's marriage would make a difference. I don't mean necessarily a difference in her feeling for Maidie; it probably won't. But a husband must come first. If Maidie is expecting still to be first with Lady Marchwood, she'll break her heart presently when she finds it's not so. Has she really been dreaming all this time of things being just as they always were?"

"No one knows what she's been dreaming exactly," Mary said despairingly. "We know that she thinks of nothing but Joy. We tried to wake her up with singing-lessons, but it wasn't enough. She dreamt all day of singing to Joy; the day-dream changed, that was all."

"That's what happens with you dreamers," said Ann. "You change the dream, but you keep on dreaming."

Mary gave her a startled look. "I—perhaps that's true. I thought I'd given it up, but—have I?"

"You know so much about it, that you ought to be able to help Maidlin," said Ann, as they reached the house. "I'll warm some milk, and she must drink it in bed. That will help her to sleep."

Mary stood despondently by the window, waiting for Jen to bring Maidie. “Why didn’t I think of that? I never do think of practical things. Nancy’s right; I’ve only changed the character of my dreams. I haven’t escaped from them. Is there no way of escape, then? Shall I drift from one dream to another all my life?”

Jen bent over Maidlin, who was crouching on the floor under the rose window of the sacristy, which Joy had always loved. “Maidie dear, do you know you’re very unkind?”

The jarring note jerked Maidlin back to life out of her bitter thoughts. “Brownie, why? I didn’t mean it.”

“No, but you don’t think of anybody but yourself,” Jen spoke gently, but was quite definitely uncompromising. “You get a silly idea in your head, and you rush off without a word to anybody, and we have to search all over the place for you. I suppose you know I’m dead tired? I’ve been travelling since nine o’clock this morning.”

Maidlin sprang up, repentant in an instant. “Jen, I *am* sorry! I didn’t think.”

“You thought all right, but only about yourself. You thought a lot of silly stuff that I never meant at all, and it upset you so much that you couldn’t think about anybody else,” Jen said firmly.

Maidlin clung to her arm and hid her face against her. “Brownie, what did you mean? I’m sorry I didn’t think. But—but Joy’s coming *to-morrow*, Brownie; and you said it would be all different.”

“Rose-of-the-World, I’ll bring Maidie back to bed,” said Jen, and Rosamund took the hint and went on ahead.

“Maidie, you love Joy very much, but your love is selfish,” Jen spoke with almost brutal plainness, but her tone was gentle and the pressure of her arm round Maidlin’s slim shoulders was reassuring. “It’s very strong love, of its kind; but it’s babyish. You’d think me a brute if I told you you love Maidlin even more than Joy, wouldn’t you?”

“Myself?” Maidlin questioned, startled and indignant. “Oh, but I don’t, Jen!”

“You care more that Joy should love you as you wish than that Joy should be happy and have the best for herself.”

Maidlin stood silent, in the darkness of a tunnelled archway, her head bent. “Do I? I never thought of that, Brownie. I—I never thought of Joy not being happy. I didn’t see Joy’s side of it at all. You mean,” she spoke wistfully, as a new idea dawned on her, “if I really loved Joy, I’d want her to have the best, and all that she wanted, and not mind about myself?”

“That’s what I mean. But you needn’t break your heart, Maidie. Nothing’s going to be different so far as you’re concerned. Joy will feel for you as she always did. I’m perfectly certain nothing will ever make her change towards you; nothing but you yourself! You might disappoint her so badly that she’d feel she loved you less; but nothing else will do it.”

“But you mean, I might love her more?” Maidlin drew a long breath. “If I were less selfish, you mean?”

“If your love grew bigger, so that it put Joy first and you second, it would be more worth giving her,” Jen said decisively. “You know, Maidie, the thing you think of all the time is what Joy will think of *you*, and how much she’ll love *you*. You’ve never realised it, but it’s Joy’s love for you that you put first. Real love—my dear kid, I know something about it now—real love wants to give, to serve, and puts itself last. Maidie, make your love for Joy real, and wide, and generous, and it will be good for both of you, and it won’t be so much afraid of being hurt.”

Maidlin put her arms up to Jen's shoulders. "Brownie, I have been a baby. I didn't see it before. Thank you, Jenny-Wren; I will try. Will you help me sometimes?"

Jen kissed her. "Always, kiddy, whenever you want me. Now you'll hurry to bed without talking to Ros, and without crying or thinking, won't you?"

"I shan't cry," Maidlin said. "But I shall think. I'm glad you told me, Brownie. I was feeling sick. But I think things will be different. *I* shall be different," and she kissed Jen again, and then broke away from her and raced across the garden and upstairs to bed.

"Don't let Maidie talk to-night, Ros," and Jen paused in the big hall by Rosamund. "I hear you've got an undying feud on with Pat Mercer? How did that happen? It's not like you to spurn an apology. Rather ungenerous, wasn't it?"

Rosamund turned from her quickly, but not before Jen had seen the hurt look leap into her eyes. She went upstairs without a word of excuse or apology, and closed and locked her door.

Jen stood gazing after her, a whistle of dismay on her lips. "My hat! It's serious. She's turned the key on me. I never knew Ros do that before. What has that idiot Pat done to upset her so? Mary-Dorothy, in ten minutes I'm coming to your room to hear all about this. Wouldn't you like to fetch Nancy too? I'm sure her common sense would be useful!"

CHAPTER XI
HELP FROM NANCY

Ann had learned enough of the ways of the Abbey girls, from observation and from Rosamund's chatter, to appreciate to the full the summons to Mary's brown and gold room, to drink coffee and talk. She knew she was being admitted to the inner shrine of friendship, and her eyes were bright with pleasure as she slipped into a rose-pink wrapper and sped along the corridor to join Mary and Jen.

"Nice of them not to want to be alone to-night!" she said to herself. "In a way it's their last night—Mary's, anyway; for it's obvious she expects to drop into the background as soon as My Lady appears."

"Are Jen and Lady Marchwood related in any way?" she asked of Mary, finding her alone and arranging cups on a small tray.

"Adopted sisters, I think," Mary smiled. "Jenny-Wren's a little younger, but she's very much one of the family. It dates from her first term at school, when she was only twelve; she spent some weeks here, when the school was in quarantine for diphtheria, and the Hall has been a second home to her ever since. When Joy arrives, I think I shall adopt Rosamund for evening pow-wows. I fancy she'd appreciate it."

"I'm sure she would," Ann said warmly, squatting on a cushion on the floor. "It would help her too."

"I shall have to do something about it. I shall miss Jen so horribly. Joy will want her, of course; in spite of Sir Andrew! Husbands are very important, no doubt; but Joy will have room and time for Jen."

"You're rather a brick, if I may say so, Mary-Dorothy," Ann remarked.

Mary stared at her. "I? Why, please? I've been feeling rather a worm for the last week."

"Oh, you needn't," Ann said seriously, toasting her fingers at the gas fire. "I meant, because of the way when you know you must give up Jen, you don't sit down and mope and be lonely, but look round for somebody else who needs you. It's topping. And those girls do need you; Ros and Maidie are both in tight places. If you can help them, out of your own experience, if possible, or else out of your imagination, you'll be doing—but you know all that!" as Jen slipped in to join them.

She switched off the electric light, and dropped wearily into a low chair. "I'll tell you about Maidie. I hope I've helped her. But it's very difficult."

Ann sat nursing her knees and listening, bright-eyed and attentive. She nodded, as Jen repeated her words to Maidlin. "That will help," she said eagerly. "Turn her thoughts outwards, to some one else. She lives too much inside."

"We know that," Jen said wearily. "That's why we gave her singing-lessons, to give her something new to think about."

"It's not enough," Ann said decisively. "She wants—oh, she wants to have some one she loves dependent on her. Maidie would work to the end of her strength for her friends; but she doesn't have to. If Lady Marchwood were ill, how Maidie would nurse her!"

Jen looked startled. Then she said, "Joy's never been ill in her life. Tell me about poor old Rosamund, Mary-Dorothy! What is it all about?"

Mary told the story briefly. “It isn’t a little thing, Brownie. It matters a lot how Ros takes this trouble.”

Jen knit her brows. “I should feel exactly as she does. I should say I’d never forgive Pat. Silly idiot, to give herself away like that!—I mean Pat, of course. I do feel for Ros!”

“We all do,” Mary said quickly. “No one has said anything to blame her.”

“But she’s blaming herself, though she won’t admit it even to herself,” Ann remarked. “She’s unhappy. That shows she’s in the wrong.”

“True for you, Nancy. But *can* she forgive Pat?” Jen queried.

“She’ll have to, I think, or she’ll be really the worse for it. She’ll need time; but if she doesn’t clear this mess up, it will always be behind her as a sore, unhappy thing.”

“I suppose that’s true,” and Jen lapsed into thought.

“She may need help,” Ann ventured.

Jen looked up. “Mary-Dorothy, I guess it’s your stunt. You’ve known what it is for somebody you trusted to hurt you badly.” Their eyes met, and Mary’s fell. “And you found you could still go on loving her, in spite of it,” Jen said with energy. “You realised she simply hadn’t thought, and you went on being friends, although she didn’t even know what she’d done. It’s easier for Ros, for Pat said she was sorry. You’ll have to talk to her, Mary. You can do it.”

Mary shrank. “I don’t think I can. I don’t feel fit.”

Jen poised a cushion, ready to hurl it at her. “Mary-Dorothy Devine! After all I’ve said ——!”

“Don’t throw things at her in her own room! You might smash her cups,” Ann pleaded.

“Mary, you’re soft. You’re an idiot,” Jen said indignantly. “You’ll never do things while you think you can’t. I do get cross with her, Nancy!”

“So I see,” Ann said politely.

“I’ve been thinking about the things you said,” and Jen ignored Mary; she put the cushion behind her back again, and spoke earnestly to Ann. “I do see that for mother and father what has happened is quite beautiful. She has gone to him, and neither of them is lonely, and she didn’t have a moment’s pain. I’m more thankful for that than I can say, for he had weeks, you know; it was very bad at the end. She hadn’t been strong lately, for she was worn out with nursing him; she’d been anxious about him for a long time, much longer than I knew. I’m so very glad she didn’t have to suffer. And I’m glad she didn’t have a long illness; she was always busy and energetic; she would have hated it so if she’d had to lie helpless, as some people do. I can quite believe that God saw what was best for them both, and has given it to them. But it does look a little bit hard on me, Nancy? I did think I was going to have a while with mother; she was coming south as soon as the Glasgow family would part with her, and we were going to take care of one another. Doesn’t He care about me too? The boys have their wives and families, but it leaves me without a home, except this dear place.”

“But, my dear,” and Ann leaned forward and spoke quickly, “He gave you ‘this dear place.’ You’ve had two homes for years. And He gave you to Mr. Marchwood, to be taken care of, before He took your mother from you. What could be gentler or more loving? You haven’t been left alone for a single day.”

Jen looked at her, wide-eyed. “Of course I hadn’t forgotten Ken. I’ve been thankful for him all along; he’s been a dear, and the very greatest comfort. But I didn’t quite see—I hadn’t thought it out. Then you think it was all arranged for me? That Ken should love me and we should be engaged, before father and mother were taken away?”

"I think," Ann said deliberately, "every one of us has to make up her mind whether she believes in chance, or in God. You must have it one way or the other. But I don't mean that everything that happens is sent by Him; you must allow for what people will do. Mr. Marchwood might not have loved you—though it's hard to imagine—and then the plan would have been spoilt, and you'd have said God had forgotten you. Don't you see? In your case the plan worked out rightly; and you'll be grateful all your life. I'm sure it's always a wise and a kind plan. But there's always the chance of its going wrong. You might have fired me out when I walked in so cheekily a week ago. I might not have had the courage to come; I was very shy! In either case I shouldn't have been here to cook your dinner to-night."

"Cook! You've done more for us than cook," said Mary.

"I do see," Jen said quickly. "And I believe it, Nancy. Mary, would you forgive me if I went to bed? I've got enough to think about for one night."

"I think we all have," and Mary turned to Ann. "Then I suppose, when we funk a difficulty or shirk a plain duty or are slack and lazy, we're failing to do our part in a plan that may spoil things for other people?"

"Obviously," said Jen. "If Nancy had been scared to come here that first evening, we might never have got friendly, and then she wouldn't have been here to talk sense to me, and I'd have gone off to Glasgow saying how cruel it all was. She showed me the beautiful side."

"We're so linked up," Ann said gravely, as she rose and they stood round the fire. "Often—most often, I suppose—we don't know when we're helping or hurting somebody else."

"But do you believe God will help us in every little tiny thing?" Jen challenged her. "Aren't lots of things too small and unimportant?"

Ann's answer was equally a challenge. "How do you know what is small and unimportant? It seemed a very little thing, my coming here as I did; but you seem to think it mattered to you."

"True for you again, Nancy. Of course, we don't know," Jen acknowledged.

Mary spoke quickly. "The biggest thing in my life, the one thing that changed the whole of life for me, was just Jenny-Wren's walking into our office with her father's manuscript, and asking if she could speak to the one who would type it. And Mrs. Taylor sent for me. I've thought ever since what a lucky chance it was."

"For you, or for us?" Jen demanded. "Look at all you've done for us!"

"Do you still look on it as a lucky chance?" Ann questioned.

"No. It was more than that," Mary said, deep feeling in her voice.

Ann turned to the door, thinking they might want a private word. But she turned back for an instant. "There's one thing I like to think of, Jenny-Wren. I suppose you know there's nothing in the world too small to be made beautiful? That if you use a microscope, the tiniest things are wonderful, and perfectly made, though you may not be able even to see them with your eyes? I like to think there's nothing too small to be cared for; and nothing too small to be important. Everything matters. Good-night! Thank you so much for asking me!" and she sped away.

Mary and Jen looked at one another. Then Jen bent and kissed Mary, and followed Ann.

Mary sat down alone before her little fire, in the half darkness, and doubtfully faced the responsibility laid on her. Everybody seemed to think she would be the one to help Rosamund with wise advice. She quailed before the task; then remembered that to-day she had prayed for help. Was the answer, perhaps, in the discovery that her own experience would help her? Mary

sat and thought over her misunderstanding with Joy a year ago, in its points of likeness and of difference with this trouble of Rosamund's, and lived it all over again in a dream.

She pulled herself up sharply. "This is what Ann said; I go from one dream to another. I don't think usefully. If I knew how to stop myself, I might be able to help Maidie. I've fought my dreams for years, but they always come back. They're stronger than I am. What was it Nancy said? My danger-point; but also the point where I could get most help. What did she mean? Suppose"—and Mary's eyes widened as she gazed at the fire, but saw the dawning of a new thought—"just suppose I'm not meant to fight against my tendency to dream? Suppose it has been a mistake to try to struggle against it? I've been beaten all along. What if the dreams are meant to help me, if I'll use them properly?"

She rose, with a half-formed impulse to go to Jen and ask if she thought this could be true; or to turn to Ann for help. But she checked herself and sat down again.

"They can't really help me; Nancy was right. I know these things are true, though I'd never thought of them before. Something inside me whispered it. Is it the same something that writes my books? I just know how they're to go, and that's all about it. I don't exactly think them out; they come. If thoughts would come like that—but have I ever listened for them? If I could know things are right, and feel them as I feel my books—but how can I tell till I've tried?"

"Here's one idea come, anyway; trust it, and go ahead!" Mary looked round, startled, for she had almost heard the words. Then she looked carefully at the idea again.

"Is my habit of dreaming meant to help me? Am I mis-using it? It's the strongest thing in my life; a thing I've been quite unable to root out or conquer. If I used it well—if it could help me—it would be the most useful thing I have; a gift, perhaps even a weapon, not a temptation to be fought. If only—oh, if only——!" and Mary clenched her hands. "If only I knew how to use it! I need something to help me!"

Her new-found trust in her intuition came to her help; that inner voice had, unrecognised, guided her work, and now that her need had opened the way, it began to lead her thoughts.

"Ann told me to find help; she said there was help for everybody. And I asked for help. If God could guide my dreams, so that they helped and were useful, instead of wasting my time ——! But why not? Nothing's too little to be important—and is this a little thing? It's a very big one to me!" And before Mary slept she prayed again for help, but more definitely and with greater belief that some answer would come.

CHAPTER XII
JOY COMES HOME

"Hello, Cookie!" Rosamund put her head in at the kitchen window, very early in the morning.

Ann, in her big overall, was singing "Midsummer Fair" as she stirred the porridge. "Hello, Cheeky!" she said amiably.

"I say, give me a job!" Rosamund vaulted over the sill and landed with a crash that rattled the plates on the dresser. "I'll help. There must be streams of things to do. I couldn't sleep; there was a silly thrush yelling, 'Joy coming! Coming, Joy! Coming home! To-day, to-day, to-day!' till I flung my shoes at him, and had to get up to go and fetch them."

"Stir this for me. Don't let it get lumpy. I heard him, but on my side of the house he was saying, 'Get up! Get up! Busy, busy, busy!' " Ann said gravely. "Is Maidie sleeping?"

"I suppose so. She shut the door between us last night, so I didn't go in. The key's on her side," Rosamund said briefly. "She wanted it, years ago, and I didn't really mind. Now and then she locks herself in; I don't know if she weeps, or writes poetry, or just sits and thinks. But she wants to be left alone. I always leave her when she's like that."

"You're wise," Ann said quietly. "She really does want it. It's a part of her nature."

"Oh, I know!" Rosamund agreed. "Maidie's got a temperament; everybody tells me so. I'm jolly glad I haven't! Do you really like cooking, Nancy? Or were you pulling Mary-Dorothy's leg? Was it just to help us out of a hole?"

"I like it," Ann said warmly. "And I was glad to come and live in this beautiful house for a while. That's the prettiest kitchen window I've ever seen."

Rosamund glanced out at the sun-drenched kitchen garden, with its varying shades of new green. "It's not bad. It's better still when the gooseberries and logans are ripe. Isn't it gorgeous for Joy to come back to it all? And on a day like this! She's been away nearly eleven months. She loves every stone and every inch of it. Fancy coming back on an April day like this, after eleven months in Africa!"

Ann looked up at her quickly. "You're very fond of her too, then?"

Rosamund's brows drew down in a frown. "Nobody understands. They all think of Maidie. I'm just as glad, and just as fond of Joy, but I don't have hysterics about it."

"And so you don't get the credit for it," Ann agreed. "But it doesn't matter if people don't understand, does it?"

"No, but I'd like Joy to know I care," Rosamund stirred so vigorously that the porridge leapt out of the pan. "Oh, sorry! I'll mop it up. Joy's been frightfully decent to me, Nancy."

"How did it happen?" Ann asked quietly, as she laid rashers of bacon in the frying-pan.

"I was a boarder at school, and Wycombe didn't suit me, so Joy asked me to live here for a term or two. My folks are in Ceylon, and my aunt lived up north. It was at the time Joy adopted Maidie, and she put it up to me to help Maidie to feel at home. Then my aunt died, and I had nowhere to go in the hols., and Joy suggested it should be a permanent arrangement, so I came to live here and go to school with Maidie every day. Of course, I've loved her for it ever since. But I can't talk about it. I never can talk about things like that. See? So Maidie's Maidie, and I'm just Ros," she said grimly.

"I expect Lady Marchwood understands," Ann said comfortingly.

"Oh no, she doesn't. Joy Shirley-Marchwood doesn't understand things like that!"

Ann made no comment, but her eagerness increased to see this "Joy," whom everybody loved, but whose lack of understanding had hurt both Mary and Rosamund. She was thankful for the train of events which had brought her at this time not only to the village, but on such friendly terms into the house itself.

Nelly Bell was laying the breakfast, her face content. She, too, was glad to be here, though she loved her babies at the Home. Mary came down, and began to consult "Nancy" about plans for the day.

Jen and Maidlin came in together from the garden, as Rosamund and Mary sat down to their porridge.

Rosamund stared. "My aunt! How did you get out? I thought you were both still asleep."

"We heard you babbling with Nancy in the kitchen," Jen explained mildly. "We've been dabbling in the dew to make us milkmaids fair."

"Can't say I see much change in you. Maidie's got the coal-black hair, but she can't rise to the 'red rosy cheeks,' " Rosamund remarked.

Her eyes, and Mary's, were on Jen's green linen frock. They made no comment, but Jen saw their look.

"As I've been saying to Maidie, I don't feel sad, so I'm not going to pretend," she said briefly. "I've looked all round this business, not just at one side of it, thanks to Nancy; and though there's sadness in it, there's still more that's beautiful. I'm going to rejoice in the beauty and be thankful. That has nothing whatever to do with my missing mother and father. There's a big blank left, but I'm not going to think about that. I'm going to fill it, as they'd want me to do. And the day Joy comes home isn't the day to feel unhappy."

"You've heaps of pluck, Brownie," Rosamund said warmly.

"I'm sure you're right," Mary said quietly and gladly. She had wakened to a new outlook on life, not yet realised or understood; she knew only, in the vague intuitive way that was her habit, that the talk and the thoughts of the night before had been helpful, and that she was happier and more hopeful. There was something, where before there had been nothing; a definite point, where all had been vague. She had asked for help, and she believed she had received it, in the deepening and widening of her own thoughts. If this could come once, it could come again; and Mary had now a sense of expectancy, where before she had been afraid to think.

By common consent, no reference was made to the problems lying behind each girl. Jen alone had solved hers, by the simple childlike acceptance of the happiness and beauty offered to her, which was characteristic of her sunny nature. But there was too much to be done, and too much thrill in the air, for any one to face difficulties on such a day.

The car set off very early to fetch Joy from the Marchwood town house, at whatever time she chose to come. Rosamund and Jen prophesied that it would be very early, and that she would arrive before lunch. "She won't be able to resist the thought of getting home," said Jen. "What would she do in town on Saturday afternoon? She'll come straight here. We must be ready for her at any moment."

Ann cooked and sang in the kitchen. Mary, in her office, settled down to business letters, gladly putting important ones aside for Joy's personal attention. Nelly Bell and Kate gave the house a final dust and polish.

Jen took charge of Joy's own room, and bade Maidlin choose and arrange flowers. Then she saw the look on Rosamund's face, as she stood hesitating by the window, too proud to ask

if there was nothing she could do.

"I say, Rose-of-the-World!" Jen called across the room. "I know you loathe housework, but I wish you'd take on this job for me! See that Joy's room is all right and nice, will you? Rather extra specially jolly, you know. I'd love to do it, but I ought to send a line to Harry to let him know Ken met me all right. And I must write to Ken."

Rosamund's face cleared. "Right-o, Brownie. I'll see to it."

Jen heard her whistling as she dusted, and laughed to herself and felt repaid for her sacrifice; she would have liked to work for Joy herself this morning. When Rosamund, in her usual high spirits again, went leaping down the staircase to find Maidlin, Jen slipped into the room to satisfy herself that all was ready, and laughed again as she discovered details Rosamund's unpractised eye had missed.

"I say, Maidie, I should have lilac. You know how Joy loves it," Rosamund suggested.

Maidlin, arranging bluebells in a vase in the pantry, looked up doubtfully. "Think so? She used to love these, Ros."

"Lilac," Rosamund said decisively. "I'll help you pick it," and they went off to the garden together.

The bowl of lilac was almost ready, when Rosamund said suddenly, "No, I don't like that. The scent will be too heavy. Wallflowers, Maidie; Joy loves the Abbey wallflowers."

Maidlin agreed. "But she loves lilac too, Ros?"

"Wallflowers," said Rosamund, and they went out together to gather them.

The brown and gold heads were hard to arrange. Maidlin was frowning and pulling them into place, when Rosamund exclaimed, "Pansies, Maidie! Pansies for thoughts. Pansies everywhere, in little low dishes. The dark ones will remind Joy of your eyes."

Maidlin, anxious to have what Joy would like best, went off to gather pansies.

As she finished arranging them in low bowls, Rosamund came whirling in. "Oh, Maidie, no! Buttercups from the orchard—the first buttercups! Think of seeing buttercups, after a year in Africa! You want wild flowers for Joy; field flowers; she always was a gipsy. There's no traveller's joy yet; but you could have buttercups!"

Maidlin looked at her, bewildered. "Do you really think they'd be pretty, Ros?"

"So springlike, you know; so fresh and simple. Suit Joy far better than garden flowers," Rosamund chattered volubly.

Maidlin obediently went to the orchard for buttercups. "Have we time, Ros? My watch isn't safe. I dropped it this morning."

"Heaps of time," and Rosamund chuckled and arranged all the discarded dishes of flowers in a row on the pantry shelf.

Maidlin was sticking tall-stemmed buttercups into the wire mesh over a big bowl, when Rosamund appeared in the doorway, her blue eyes bright with mischief.

"I say, Maidie," she said seriously, "don't you think Joy would rather have bluebells?"

Maidlin looked up in amazement, and was just in time to catch that look. "Ros! Oh, you've been teasing all along!" she wailed. "You are a pig! *Look* at those flowers! Mary—look!" she called tragically, pointing towards the row of vases. "Look what she's made me do!"

"Had to do something to cheer you up. You look like a funeral."

Mary looked questioningly at the array of bowls and dishes. "Is it a flower-show?"

"It's Ros, being silly. Brownie, come and take her away," Maidlin pleaded. "Which of these would Joy like best, Jenny-Wren?"

"Put one of each," Rosamund suggested wickedly.

Maidlin took up the vases of bluebells. "I thought of these myself. You can have all the rest," she said, and carried the bluebells upstairs.

Rosamund promptly seized the lilac for her room. "Just what I wanted!"

"Pansies for me," said Jen. "And I'll give some of them to Auntie Shirley."

Mary took the buttercups. "These will be lovely in my bedroom."

"We'll give the wallflowers to Nancy, for her kitchen," said Jen. "She's talking about 'my kitchen' already; aren't you, Nancy? I believe you've settled in for good and all."

Ann was mixing a pudding, her sleeves rolled up. "Oh, cheers! I love those. That's just what my kitchen needed. Who did them for me? Yes, I'm afraid you'll find you can't get rid of me. On the window-sill, please, Ros; that's lovely. Now I'm ready for visitors!"

Maidlin was upstairs for a longer time than seemed necessary to place vases of bluebells in a bedroom, even if she tried the effect of them in several places before she was satisfied. When she came down, she found Rosamund arranging a triumphal arch of green branches above the front door.

"I say, Ros," Maidie's voice was abnormally innocent, "isn't it rather a pity to have all that mess in your room just when Joy's coming home?"

"*Mess?*" shouted Rosamund, and leapt off the step-ladder and went racing upstairs to the room she had left so tidy. Her wrathful outcry at sight of her top drawer turned upside down, and handkerchiefs, hair-ribbons, belts, and odds and ends heaped on the floor, brought a brief gleam of satisfaction to Maidlin's preoccupied eyes. But it was the tradition of the family, established by Joy and Jen by precept and example years ago, that anybody guilty of ragging must expect and accept retaliation without complaint; and Rosamund knew she was fair game.

"I'd been thinking I'd have to tidy it," she said philosophically. "It isn't exactly the time I'd have chosen, but here goes! I'm glad Maidie had the gumption to do it; she's stiff with excitement—thrilled to the bones. Her face, when I kept suggesting new flowers, was ripping!" and she chuckled as she folded ribbons and collected stray pins and brooches.

Maidlin was, indeed, tense with suppressed expectation. Her eyes seemed larger and darker than ever, and her face, always pale, was white with the strain of pent-up excitement. Jen, a little anxious, suggested a walk, or an hour in the Abbey, but knew it was useless; Maidie must keep within call, and within sight of the drive. She wandered about restlessly, doing little jobs; opened the piano, practised scales for five minutes, and closed the piano again.

Jen was strongly tempted to go upstairs and empty out her drawers, just to give her something to do. "Maidie, go and talk to Auntie Shirley," she suggested. But Maidlin shook her head, and would not go upstairs.

"Don't you know what time to expect Lady Marchwood?" Ann asked, as Jen paused near the kitchen door.

"She said 'during the morning.' They must have spent the night in town. They'll come out by car, so they may be any minute. It's dreadfully trying, isn't it? It's wearing Maidie out," Jen said, in a low voice.

Ann looked across at Maidlin's slim figure, in her lemon-yellow frock, with heavy dark hair falling loosely, as Joy had always liked to see it; plaits were necessary for school, and Maidlin found them comfortable at all times, but Joy had liked to see her hair loose, and so it was hanging round her like a cloak. She was standing by a long window in the entrance-hall, her eyes on the drive beyond the sunny lawn.

"She hears something," Ann said suddenly, as Maidlin raised her head and stiffened.

"*I* can't hear anything," Jen was beginning, when Maidlin slipped like an eager bird across the hall, and was flying over the lawn before any one else knew that Joy had come home.

"There's nothing there. She's made a mistake," cried Jen, running to the door.

Ann, eager and interested, was close behind her. "I hear the horn. Look, there's the car. She did know, Jenny-Wren!"

"Witchcraft, chance! She couldn't have heard," Jen cried. "She's got ahead of us all, anyway! What she was hoping to do, of course!"

The big car stopped at the end of the drive, and Maidlin disappeared inside, laughing and crying, into Joy's arms. Then the car came on again.

Jen had started to follow, but checked herself. "Ros! Mary! Here's Joy! Here they are! I always forget Andrew's existence!"

"They all do," Ann murmured laughing, and withdrew to her kitchen door, out of the way of the excitement.

With a wild rush, Rosamund came whirling down the big staircase. "Where's Maidie? Haven't you told her?"

"Oh, my dear kid, Maidie's in the car with Joy long ago!" Jen said laughing. "We're all back numbers. Come along!" and she caught Rosamund's hand and they ran out together.

"Is it Miss Joy?" and Nell and Kate came to join Ann in the doorway.

"It seems to be," Ann admitted, watching eagerly.

Mary Devine kept in the background, waiting her turn. Then, with a sudden idea, she ran upstairs to Mrs. Shirley's room, to tell her all was well and that Joy would come up to her at once.

Ann saw Jen and Rosamund leap to the door of the car before it had stopped; then they disappeared inside, and she said laughing to Nelly Bell, "It must be a tight fit in there!"

Then Jen was outside again, and Rosamund carried in a couple of travelling bags, and Maidlin and Jen between them led Joy in, as if unwilling to give up their hold upon her for a second.

All talking at once, they surrounded her in the hall. Then Jen made herself heard.

"Shut up, Ros! Auntie's all right, Joy; but she's in her room. It's early for her; she's only been getting up about twelve. Well, she isn't very fit, but nothing to worry about. But where's Andrew, my dear girl? What have you done with your hubby? You don't mean to say you've come home alone?"

Joy sank wearily into a chair. "I'm tired! Isn't there a letter waiting for me?" Her voice was full of disappointment. "No letter at all, Jen? I was counting on a letter from him here."

"What *do* you mean, Joy Shirley?" Jen demanded vigorously. "Hasn't he come home too?"

Joy tossed aside the close hat that had covered her beautiful bronze hair, and Maidlin's eager fingers loosened the big travelling cloak that covered her. Ann's watching eyes widened at sight of her.

"She is beautiful! But I hadn't understood. I'd better hurry up with lunch; she'll be ready for it."

As she turned to go, she heard Joy's explanation. "Andrew isn't here. I came with the Savilles—great friends of his, whom we stayed with in Nairobi. I wanted to get home, and they were coming. He was to follow by the next boat or so; he was to take young Lord Saville up-country on a short trip, after lion. It was a promise, but the trip had been delayed. I got

impatient to be home, and Lady Saville and her daughters were coming, so I came with them, and the other two were to follow very shortly. We stayed in Cairo, and then a fortnight with Joan in Malta, as I told you in my letters; so I hoped a letter from Andrew might have got here before me. He ought to arrive quite soon."

"Letters often come on Mondays," said Jen reassuringly. "Sure to be one then, 'Traveller's Joy!' It's only two days to wait. It might even come to-night."

"I'll just have to wait. But I hoped to find it waiting for me. Oh, it's nice to be home again!" and Joy lay back in her chair and gazed about the hall. "Travelling's all right and jolly, but the best thing is coming home! It's lovely to see all you dear people again! Maidie, how you've grown, dear kid. You're getting pretty, Maidie."

Maidlin hid her face against Joy's knee, as she knelt beside her; a wave of colour had swept into her face. "Don't go away again, Joy! We want you here."

"I think I shall stay at home now for a long time," Joy said quietly. "I'm very tired. Take me up to Auntie's room, Maidie!" and she rose and went slowly up the stairs.

Rosamund watched them go in silence. Then she turned to Jen. "Now Maidie will be happy again. It is jolly for her."

"You are plucky, Rose-of-the-World!" Jen said warmly.

CHAPTER XIII
NANCY AND NELLY IN THE KITCHEN

Rosamund sought Ann Rowney in the kitchen. “Give me a job! I want to be useful. Joy and Maidie have run into Mary-Dorothy on the stairs, and they’re falling on one another’s necks. What shall I do? Peel potatoes?”

“Done hours ago, infant,” Ann said laughing. “Everything’s ready. Sit on the window-sill and talk to me, while I make this gravy and then dish up.”

“I’d better not offer to help you dish up, perhaps,” and Rosamund kept at a safe distance. “I would like to be able to do things!”

Ann raised her eyebrows. “I thought you were always doing things? Isn’t that the difference between you and Maidie? You do things, and she dreams?”

“I know. I fly round and get a move on. That’s why I want to know how to do things that are worth while. I couldn’t cook and serve a dinner to save my life. You’re so quick; and yet you’re so neat. You don’t spill or splash, or drop things.”

Ann, busy with the oven door and trays, laughed. “If you drop things they break, and if you spill you have to clean it up. You soon learn not to. You’ve time enough; but I should learn to cook, if I were you. It’s fun, and tremendously satisfying; and you never know when it will come in handy.”

“As it did for us, yesterday. I say, though, Nancy, what’s going to happen to your job in town?”

“Never mind about my job in town. Could you get hold of Mary-Dorothy, and ask her how soon Kate may take in the soup?”

Rosamund slid off the sill. “It’s ripping to have Joy come back alone. We like Andrew, of course; but I’m quite content to have him in East Africa.”

“Lady Marchwood isn’t,” Ann observed.

“I bet Maidie’s pleased he hasn’t come,” and Rosamund went off in search of Mary or Jen.

Ann, busy about the kitchen, smiled at the clatter of eager voices from the dining-room every time Kate opened the door. “How happy they all are! I *am glad* to be here!”

When coffee had been taken in, and Kate, Nelly Bell and Ann were sitting down to their own lunch, Rosamund appeared at the kitchen door.

“Nancy, come and speak to Joy; we’ve been telling her—oh, but not till you’ve finished. We didn’t think. We’re going to sit on the terrace; you must come too, when you’ve had your lunch. You know Mary said you weren’t to wash up. She’ll come and fetch you, if you don’t come. And don’t go and tidy yourself; you look beautiful! You’re quite all right, really. I’ll tell Joy she’s got to wait. She’ll understand.”

“Shall I go at once?” Ann looked doubtfully at Nell, as Rosamund disappeared. “It seems so rude to keep them waiting.”

“Miss Joy won’t like it, if you do, Miss Nancy,” said Kate. “She’s all for people being treated decent; real good to us, she is. You have your lunch, as Miss Rosamund says. They’ll be better pleased. You take it while it’s hot. My, but you make nicer soup than Cook ever did!”

Ann laughed. “Nell must come to be introduced too. We’ll go together; ‘Nancy and Nelly from the kitchen!’ ”

Kate was exclaiming rapturously over the pudding, which had been exciting her, in anticipation, all morning, and Ann's laugh was ringing out at her comments, when a tap came at the door.

"May I come in? You sound so happy," and Joy stood in the doorway, wearing a loosely-falling wrap of pale green and white, her bright bronze hair shining in the sun streaming in from the garden.

She loved every room of her house, and particularly loved the kitchen, with its well-scrubbed wood, its shining brass and copper pans, and the big window opening on trees and flowers and sunshine. Her look swept round with keen restful satisfaction; then dwelt with interest on the slight, dark girl, with the smooth cropped head and bright, black eyes, and big pink pinafore, who had risen hurriedly at sight of her.

Ann was flushed, in keen appreciation of this friendly act. Nelly Bell and Kate had started up, in delighted welcome; but Ann's pleasure was deeper than theirs. She knew that it was for her Joy had come, because of what Rosamund and the rest had been saying; she would never forget that Lady Marchwood had not waited, but had come to welcome her.

Joy came up to her, with a new dignity which Rosamund and Maidlin and Jen and Mary were realising all the time; something which had not been there when she went away.

"I do think it's good of you to have come to our rescue! They've been telling me; all at once, of course; perhaps you heard them? I want you to know how much I appreciate your kindness. It makes such a difference to the feeling in the house to know there are friends in every part of it. I'm quite sure, from what Mary and Jen and the children say, you are all real friends, and you must let me into the friendship too. It would have been so different, and so horrible, to feel there was a stranger in here. If you'll really consent to go on feeding us for a while,"—her brown eyes laughed down into Ann's black ones—"we'll all think it's more than kind of you. I like to feel it's a friend and not a stranger who is feeding me!"

"I'm ever so happy to be here," Ann smiled up at her. "If Cook should have to stay at home altogether, I'd like to go on feeding you for a while; if you can put up with my cooking!"

"It's several grades above Cook's," Joy said laughing. "The children want to know if they can have that pudding every day for a week. I'll have to give up calling them children, shan't I?"

"Oh, they're really big girls now," Ann said gravely, with laughing eyes. "I believe Rosamund is thinking of putting her hair up. And Maidlin looks years younger to-day without her plaits."

"They're still my children, though. Maidie will always be my baby," and then Joy turned quickly to welcome Nelly Bell and to say a word to Kate.

"Oh no, she won't!" Ann said to herself, as Lady Marchwood left them to finish their lunch.

In the doorway Joy turned. "One thing I do insist on, Miss Rowney—or may I call you Nancy, as the others do? Thank you so much!—well then, if you'll feed us we'll be more than grateful. But the rest of the work you're to leave to Nelly and Kate. They can do it all. You must have part of the day to yourself. As soon as you've had your own lunch, you must feel yourself free until it's time to think about dinner. Nelly and Kate will see to tea in turns. I want you to rest in the garden, or talk to us, or go into the Abbey or the woods, or play tennis with Jen, or drive with me and Mary, or play with the children, as you feel inclined. You're not to work all day, or I shall be unhappy about you."

"That's very kind of you," Ann said warmly, and accepted the offer as frankly as it was made. "I'd love some tennis, if you really don't mind."

"Rosamund and Jen will be delighted. If you can coax Maidie to play, instead of sitting gazing at me, it will be good for her," and Joy went back to the terrace.

Ann's heart was full of thankfulness as she went up to her room, and changed her morning gingham suit for a white linen frock. To be one of the household even as cook was great cause for rejoicing; to be accepted so thoroughly as a friend by everybody was good fortune she had never dreamed of.

She went out to the terrace, swinging a shady hat in her hand, and humming a dance as she went. Mrs. Shirley was sitting in the sunshine, with Joy beside her on the wide stone seat, on which Mary had heaped all the cushions she could find. Rosamund and Jen had annexed two of these, and were sprawling on the bank which sloped down to the lawn, the sun shining in Jen's yellow curls and on Rosamund's gleaming plaits; Maidlin was curled up at Joy's side.

Rosamund greeted Ann with a shout. "Nancy! We're waiting for you to make up a four. What a time you've been making yourself beautiful!"

"Say clean," Ann suggested. "I'm quite sure there was flour on my nose when Lady Marchwood came to call on me in my kitchen. I rather fling the flour about when the impulse to make puddings seizes me."

"It was on your cheek," Joy said laughing.

"Must have been kissing the pudding," Jen said seriously. "Here's a racquet, Nancy; can you use that one? Then do play with Ros! She's teasing the life out of us. Mary's swotting at proofs. I think she thought we wanted to be alone with Joy, and so she had a bad attack of work-mania. But she says she didn't touch them yesterday, and she's getting all behind, so we let her go."

"Come on, Maidie!" Rosamund commanded. "We haven't four without you."

"Won't you play, Joy?" and Maidlin turned to Joy. "I'll fetch your shoes."

"No, dear, I'll sit with Auntie. But I'd like to see you play."

Rosamund gave Maidlin an amused look. "Come on, old chap. Joy doesn't want to race about. She's got to rest, after coming all the way from East Africa."

Maidlin went reluctantly, and left most of the play to her partner. She and Jen were beaten by Ann and Rosamund, and went gladly to sit down again, while Ros eagerly challenged Ann to singles.

Jen slipped her arm through Maidlin's and drew her into a corner. "Come and help me get Joy's tea, and relieve Nell and Kate, Maidie. We'll take turns; Ros and Mary shall do it to-morrow."

As they sat together after tea, Joy said quietly, "It's almost like old times. If only I'd had Andrew's letter, I'd have nothing left to wish for. Jenny-Wren, it is jolly that you're able to be here! Ken must marry you soon, and turn that opal ring into a gold one; and then you'll really belong to us. You told me everything in letters, of course; but, oh, Jenny-Wren! I am so glad not to see you in black for your father!"

A startled look swept round. Jen had been anxious not to cloud Joy's first day with sad news, and her story had not been told. But it was impossible to shirk the telling now.

She rose quickly and went to Joy, and knelt beside her and hid her face in Joy's arms. "Joy, it's mother, too. Oh, my dear, I heard too late to see her. She was in Glasgow, with Harry and Alison. It was just a week ago. I only got back last night, just in time to be here when you came."

"Jen, my darling! Oh, you poor kiddy!" and Joy's arms closed round her, in startled dismay. "Oh, my dear, I'm so glad you've come back to us! You felt this was your home, didn't you, Jenny-Wren?"

"The only place I cared to go," Jen whispered, and clung to her.

Ann touched Rosamund and Maidlin, and signed to them to follow her. Her look was so peremptory that they obeyed without a word; and Joy and Jen were left alone.

"Poor old Brownie!" Rosamund sighed. "She's a real sport, Nancy. I'd help her if I could."

"You'll do that best by leaving her with her friend just now. Take me to see the greenhouses," Ann commanded.

That evening's dinner was such a successful festival that "Cook Nancy" was summoned to the drawing-room along with the coffee to receive congratulations.

"And now we're all going to bed early," Joy announced. "At least, we're going upstairs! Nancy, how many nights have you spent in this house?"

"One," Ann said laughing. "I know. You don't go to sleep. You sit on one another's beds and talk."

"Whose bed did you sit on last night?"

"Mary-Dorothy's; but it was the fender."

"Whole family there?" Joy inquired.

"No, only me," said Jen. "We left the babes to sleep in peace."

"You're going to sit on mine to-night, aren't you, Jenny-Wren?" and Joy turned wearily towards the staircase. "I am tired! But we must have our pow-wow. I shall have a while with Maidie, and then you'll come along to me."

"I was hoping your ladyship would have me," Jen said seriously.

"I shall conform to the custom of the house," Ann said to herself, as she stood by the open window of her room, enjoying the breeze and the murmur of the trees and the scent of unseen flowers. "I think—yes, I'd better get it over. It will be on my mind till I do. Mary-Dorothy's the one. She's the business head of the house. And so far as I know, nobody's sitting on her bed at the moment."

She slipped into her dressing-gown, since that also seemed to be the custom of the house, and went along the corridor to Mary's room.

"Mary-Dorothy!" and she tapped on the door. "May I come in? Will you have me? I want to ease my mind. I have to make a confession."

Rosamund looked up from her place on the fender-stool. "I got here first," she said triumphantly. "I half thought you'd come, Nancy."

Mary Devine turned from her cupboard, where she was hunting for shortbread biscuits. "How nice of you! I feel so proud that you cared to come. I fetched Ros, but it was good of you to know I'd like to have you. I hardly thought you'd feel it worth while, when Jen wouldn't be here."

"Not Maidie?" asked Ann, as she sat down by Rosamund.

"Maidie's had Joy, and they shut the door and babbled away to one another," Rosamund said lightly, her voice not showing how much she had felt being shut out of the confidential talk. "Joy came to the door and said: 'Maidie's going to sleep now, old thing, so don't come in and wake her up.' And she shut the door again. So when Mary-Dorothy came and yanked me out of bed to sit on her fender, 'course I didn't dream of waking Maidie."

"That was fair. She'd had Joy," Ann acknowledged.

"What did you say when you came in?" Mary asked curiously. "A confession, Nancy?"

Ann stared back at her, bright-eyed. “I’m nervous. There’s something I ought to tell you. I haven’t told you everything about myself. I’ve a secret, and it’s making me uneasy.”

Rosamund fairly wriggled with delight. “Tell us, Nancy! What were you before you came here? A forger, or a burglar, or something? Are you a fugitive escaping from justice? Hiding from the arm of the law—that sort of thing?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Rose-of-the-World. But it’s not as thrilling as all that. I haven’t been quite honest, and it’s on my mind, now that you’ve all been so jolly friendly to me, that’s all.”

Mary set the biscuit tin on the hearth between her visitors. “I’m sure it’s nothing serious. I’m not the least worried, Nancy. But you’ve made me curious.”

Ann laughed. “It’s the friendliness of all you nice people that has made it necessary for me to tell you. Mary, you thought I came from Mrs. Taylor’s typewriting-office in town, didn’t you?”

Mary stared at her. “Well, didn’t you? I wrote to Mrs. Taylor that we’d be glad to entertain two or three girls, and she sent me your name and another girl’s, and said the other would be glad to bring a friend.”

“Norah and Con,” Ann agreed. “Yes, that’s how it happened. But I was only a temporary person at the office; very temporary. I can typewrite, but I’m really a journalist.”

She clasped her knees and gazed at Mary, half defiantly, her black eyes very bright.

“I say, what fun!” cried Rosamund. “Do you write for the papers? Nancy, couldn’t you help Mary with her proofs? She won’t trust me.”

“I’d love to help, if she’d trust me. I do write for a paper,” Ann explained quickly. “But I was wanting a holiday when I came here; I was needing it very badly—and funds didn’t run to anything so jolly as a fortnight in the country. With all expenses paid, it seemed too good to be true. I was very tired, and I jumped at the chance. And in the office I’d heard about you, from the girls who used to know you, Mary-Dorothy; they’d told me about your articles, and I knew all about your book, and the girls who had been to stay here had told me how lovely it was, and what a jolly job you’d got, and how kind everybody was. I was longing to see you, and the Abbey, and all the people I’d heard about, and so——”

“Had you heard about me?” Rosamund demanded. “What had you heard, Nancy?”

“I’d heard there were some children at the Hall,” Ann said crushingly.

Rosamund rose with dignity and walked to Mary’s dressing-table. With great deliberation and in silence, while Ann and Mary looked at one another in amusement, she rolled up her long plaits over her ears and stuck in a handful of pins. Then she turned to them haughtily. “To-morrow I shall be grown-up. ‘Children at the Hall,’ indeed!”

“I shouldn’t,” Ann said laughing. “You’ll have it up long enough. But it does make you look tall, Rosamunda; or else it’s the long gown.”

Rosamund wrapped her blue dressing-gown about her and strolled majestically up and down the room.

“I like it. I think I’ll keep it up, and give Maidie fits. She hates the thought of growing up.”

“You look very nice,” Mary said quietly, and turned to Ann again. “But I don’t understand. What were you doing at Mrs. Taylor’s?”

“Did you come down here to write articles about us?” and Rosamund squatted on her stool again. “Oh, do, Nancy! Describe the village, and the Abbey, and all of us!”

Ann flushed quickly, and looked at Mary. “My Editor wanted articles on the life of City girls. I tried various stunts; I served in a big West-End shop at sale time, and I had a while as a

waitress in a tea-shop, and as a lift-girl. It was all great fun, and I got good copy as I went along."

"What topping sport!" Rosamund said delightedly. "Did you sweep a crossing or sell flowers?"

"I sold programmes in a cinema. I was studying typists and learning all about them—how they lived and worked, where they lunched and what clubs they belonged to, how they managed to afford holidays and where they liked to go, what they read and talked about or didn't read and talk about—when your invitation came, and Mrs. Taylor gave me the chance to come down here. She knew what I was doing, but I was a good typist and she was shorthanded at the moment, and so she didn't mind. And—and when she gave me the chance of coming down here, she said"—and Ann coloured quickly again—"she said—and this is the bad part of it—that I might find copy here. And I came with that idea; I accepted your invitation with the hope of adding a chapter to my series, on the unexpected holidays some working girls get, and the kindness of people who make them possible, and perhaps of enthusing other people to do the same. Of course, I hadn't been here one day when I knew it would be impossible. I put away all thoughts of writing this place up, and just settled down to enjoy myself as you meant me to do, and to have as good a holiday as I could. But I did come meaning to turn you all into copy; and as soon as you began to be friendly I felt bad about it, and I've felt bad ever since."

"I don't see why. Why did it matter? Why shouldn't you write us up, if that's what you call it?" Rosamund questioned.

Mary said quietly, "It was nice of you to own up. It's better we should understand. Joy wouldn't want names used, of course; but it's quite possible she would be willing for you to write something, if you kept it impersonal so far as you could. She would like to pass on her idea to other people, I'm sure. Shall I tell her and Jen all about it to-morrow?"

"I wish you would," Ann said gratefully. "And tell them I apologise for coming here with such an idea in my mind."

"But doesn't your Editor want you back?" Rosamund demanded. "Don't say we're never going to have another pudding of yours, Nancy! I live only for your puddings now."

"I've sent him some stuff this week; something I was working on in town," Ann explained. "And I've an idea I can find material for an article in the village, without hurting any one's feelings. That nice woman who makes the pottery and teaches the village girls told me all about it and begged me to write it up, as she might get orders; and the weaving girls said the same. If Lady Marchwood sees no objection, I think I can do them a good turn; and it will be a change from my City girls."

"I'm sure Joy won't mind that," Mary said warmly.

"I shall feel you're thinking out articles whenever I look at you," Rosamund gibed. "*Do* make me into one, Nancy! How would you describe me?"

"A queer amphibious creature, half one thing and half t'other, and never anything very long; a sort of lanky Peter Pan, who's on the verge of growing up, but can't quite decide to take the plunge," Ann retorted, and rose. "Mary-Dorothy, now that I've eased my mind I'll go to bed. If you will pass on what I've told you to the others, I'll be really grateful. And if Lady Marchwood should give me leave to write anything, of course I'll submit it to her before I send it away."

"How long can you stay with us? We don't want to lose you," Mary said anxiously.

"Puddings! Tarts! Cakes!" said the amphibious creature, and smacked her lips.

“Oh, I want to stay for some time, if you’ll have me,” and Ann’s eyes met Mary’s eagerly. “I’m interested in everybody. I don’t want to go away until I have to. I’ll write and say I’m detained here indefinitely, but will send my stuff along as regularly as I can. If Cook comes back, I’ll have to move out; we must be fair to her. But until she comes, I hope you’ll let me stay.”

“That’s all right,” Mary said, with deep relief. “We don’t want to have to get in a stranger. I don’t expect Cook back for some time.”

“You stay and make puddings for us, Cooky,” said Rosamund.

“It’s time you went back to school, Cheeky,” Ann said cheerfully.

Rosamund’s face clouded. “I’m going to bed. Good-night, Mary-Dorothy. Thanks for asking me, old thing! ‘Night, Nancy!”

She went off down the corridor alone.

Ann shot an amused look of understanding at Mary, but it was too late to start another discussion. She nodded, and followed Rosamund, but found Ros’s door closed, so went on quietly to her own room.

CHAPTER XIV
ROSAMUND ASKS FOR HELP

Ann, beating up eggs for scrambling, looked out of the kitchen window at Rosamund and Maidlin, strolling along the orchard paths among the gooseberry bushes in the early sunshine. Rosamund's hair was still hanging in its long plaits, in spite of her evening threat; she wore a linen frock of deep green, while Maidlin's was of her favourite pale yellow. Arm-in-arm, and deep in conversation, in which Maidlin's part was that of attentive listener, they passed out of sight among the apple trees, where the blossom was now thick.

Ann turned to Mary, with whom she had been discussing menus for the day. "Were you able to help Rosamund last night?"

"I didn't try," Mary said quickly. "I mean, not directly. I gave her the chance to ask, but she didn't take it. I thought it was wiser; I've no wish to lecture her. I felt if she were ready for help, she would probably ask for it. It seems to me one may do harm by saying too much."

"Yes, that's so. But there's the risk of saying too little, too. But I think you're right this time. She'll ask when she's ready. She isn't happy about school. When does term begin?"

"Next Wednesday. Ros and Maidie are both dreading it," Mary said, looking worried. "I suppose it's the first time Rosamund hasn't looked forward to the beginning of term. How could she? She has to meet Pat Mercer, and she says she won't speak to her. And Maidie has to say whether she'll be the new Queen."

"Hasn't she made up her mind? She'd better not be forced to it if she really shrinks from it so terribly."

"Ros says she loathes the very thought of it," Mary laughed in sympathy. "I know how she feels. I'd have been terrified of the ordeal and the responsibility, and yet in my heart I'd have longed to take it."

"It would be good for her, if she could do it without feeling the strain too much," Ann said thoughtfully. "She needs to make an effort to lift herself out of her dreams. But I feel the good lies in the effort, and in her own choice of it. If you force her, or shake her out of her dreams, you might do her harm. I should leave both her and Ros to settle their own affairs, Mary-Dorothy. If they can do it for themselves, they'll be all the better for it. If they want help, they'll come to one of us. It was a good move to invite Ros to your room at night; quite brilliant! If she wants you, she'll ask to come next time."

In a far corner of the orchard, Rosamund turned to Maidlin. "Maidie, what about it? Did you talk to Joy? Doesn't she want you to be Queen?"

Maidlin flushed quickly. "She said, not to do it just to please her; she didn't want that. But —oh, I wish you hadn't let them ask me! It would have been so much easier. Joy knows I've been asked. She'll feel I've funked."

"I believe she'd like you to do it."

"I know she would," Maidlin admitted. "And I want to do it to please her. I'd like to do something hard for her. But she said it wouldn't be right."

"She'd be awfully bucked to see you crowned," Rosamund tempted.

Maidlin's frightened eyes saw a vision of the ceremony—the excitement—herself on the platform, the centre of all the attention; and she shrank back into herself. "Ros, how could I? It wouldn't be me," she pleaded.

Rosamund stood looking down, her toe poking the old tortoise who lived in the orchard and was just waking up after the winter. “I’m in an awful hole, you know, Maidie. And you could get me out of it by being Queen,” she said desperately.

Maidlin looked at her in dismay. “How, Ros? How would it help? I know you don’t want to see Pat. But how could I help?”

“If you refuse to be Queen, Pat’s next on the list,” and Rosamund faced her, her usually happy eyes clouded with distress. “That was said quite plainly last term. ‘If Maidie won’t, we’ll ask Pat Mercer.’ I didn’t object. I used to like Pat. I thought she was straight and played the game. Now—now that I know what she’ll do—I can’t vote for her. We couldn’t have a Queen who cheated.” Her face grew hard. “We couldn’t trust her. I’d have to explain, and that would be sneaking. Or else I’d have to refuse to vote for her and not say why. Oh, Maidie, you could smooth out all that worry by being Queen; and you’ve been asked!”

They stood and gazed at one another. Maidlin, looking at the matter much as Rosamund did, saw the seriousness of the position, and found here a real call to action, even if the effort involved amounted to heroism. Joy would make allowances and forgive, if she disappointed her hopes; but if she failed Ros at this crisis, it plunged Ros into deeper difficulties than ever, and they were bad enough already. For years Maidlin had looked up to Rosamund, without realising it, admiring, adoring, grateful, depending, as to a loved leader who had all the qualities she lacked herself. Here, suddenly, was a cry for help from Rosamund which she could not ignore.

Something new and brave woke to life within her. She raised her head proudly and faced the world with courage for the first time. “Ros, if you’ll help me, I’ll do it,” she said.

Rosamund understood, as hardly any one else could have done. This was for her, not even for Joy. She would never forget it. With a very unusual impulse, she caught Maidlin in her arms. “You dear old sport! Maidie, I’ll help all the way. I’ll see that it isn’t hard. I’ve done it for two years; I can help ever so much, if you’ll only take the plunge.”

“I’ve taken it,” Maidlin clung to her new-found courage. “I won’t back out. But—but will I have to make a speech, Ros? I *can’t*; you know I can’t!”

Rosamund laughed, in sheer relief. “It’s not absolutely necessary, kid. They say that Joy funked the speech, and just bowed and smiled and looked pretty. You can do all that; it’s only hardened sinners like me and Jenny-Wren who insist on hearing their own voices. Or you could *sing* your speech!” and she laughed again. “You’re never shy about singing!”

“I wouldn’t mind that. But how could I, Ros? You’re teasing.”

“I was, but I’m not now,” Rosamund said eagerly. “You know how the girls love to hear you sing! We could make up some words about how glad you are to be Queen, to some old tune, and you could sing that at them instead of spouting an address. You know that thing Cicely Everett made up, and Miriam sang for Joy? Joy had it printed and hung up in her room, and she lent it to me when I was crowned—all about being a good Queen. What about that tune? You wouldn’t want much in the way of words. I say, Maidie! Don’t tell Joy and Jen; just say, of course you can’t make a speech. But when Jen has crowned you, you turn to the crowd and sing something like this,”—and she hummed the old tune.

“ ‘I’m glad to be Queen,
I’m glad to be Queen,
I’m glad to be Queen
This May-Day.

‘I’ll be a good Queen,
I’ll be a good Queen,
I’ll be a good Queen
For May-Day.’ ”

“Chorus, please! Now let’s see—oh, yes!—

“ ‘Please to go on with your dancing!
Weaving your figures entrancing!
This is our holiday.
This is our jolly day,
Singing and dancing on May-Day!’ ”

“Now, Maidie! That would do jolly well! I’ve bagged some of Cicely’s rhymes, of course, but we’ll call it a modern version. Will you? Oh, do!”

Maidlin protested, laughing. “Those aren’t real words, Ros. It’s just doggerel.”

“Like your cheek, and me making up a beautiful poem for you to sing! My dear kid, you know the girls will yell with joy if you just open your mouth and croak, ‘La, la, la’ at them, so long as you sing. They won’t bother about the words. And you couldn’t possibly forget my words, however nervy you were,” Rosamund urged.

“They’re not true, not all of them,” Maidlin pointed out. “I shan’t be glad.”

“Perhaps you will, when you’ve said it three times. Shall you wear pink, Maidie? You used to say you would. What flower—pink may?”

“I’d like this colour, and primroses for my flower,” Maidlin said, flushing shyly again. “It’s not like any one else’s train. Cicely’s was golden; I love pale yellow.”

“Cheers! You’ll be called Primrose for ever. I’m so glad you’ve gone off pink, because we’ve got Strawberry already, and you’d have clashed with her every time, or else with my crimson. Primrose will look lovely with your hair; I’ll do it for you, Maidie, so that it will look topping under a white crown. And think how pretty your train will be next to Brownie’s!”

“Won’t you make it up with Pat, Ros?” Maidlin pleaded. “It will be so awfully uncomfortable! Isn’t she games’ captain for the Sixth? You can’t go on not speaking to her!”

Rosamund’s face hardened again. “Pat cheated me. I trusted her, and she let me down. I could never trust her again. That’s all about it, Maidie.”

Maidlin glanced at her, almost timidly, for this was a new Rosamund and one she feared. “You’re generally so jolly, Ros,” she faltered, quite unable to put her thought into words.

“You used to say you were two people,” Rosamund said abruptly. “So am I, and the two are exact opposites. Just because I’m generally jolly with everybody, and friends all round, the other side that Pat Mercer has dug up out of me from somewhere is all the other way. I didn’t know I could hate anybody; but I can, and I do. She let me down when I’d trusted her. I can’t ever forgive that.”

"I know it's awfully hard, and Pat was a pig," Maidlin said unhappily. "I don't see how you can forget it and go on as usual. But it can't be right to hate anybody, Ros."

Rosamund stood poking the tortoise again, till he spat at her in disgust. "Never mind me and Pat. If that idea's worth anything, Maidie, your inside self ought to be as brave as a lion, because your outside gets frightened so easily. Can't you dig up the other half of you and join the two together? I believe it poked its head up when you said you'd be Queen to help me."

Maidlin slipped her hand through her friend's arm. "Ros, I do hate to see you so worried about Pat. I believe you'll have to square that up before you'll feel all right again."

"Do you know we're late for brekker? Come on, and tell Joy and Brownie your good news," and Rosamund took Maidlin's hand, and ran with her to the house.

"Late, my children. I shall fine you a penny each," Jen met them on the terrace. "I say, have you heard the news? We've got a representative of the Press in our midst. Guess who?"

"Oh, that's easy!" Rosamund said crushingly. "Old Nancy-Cook. We know all about that. I'll tell you something much more thrilling!"

"What, please?" Jen asked meekly. "You were in Mary-Dorothy's sanctum after bedtime last night, evidently, Rose-of-the-World. What's more thrilling than our little journalist?"

Rosamund waved her hand dramatically towards Maidlin. "The twelfth Queen—Queen Primrose. You'll have to crown her, Brownie."

Maidlin's shy eyes met Jen's delighted ones bravely. "It's to help Ros out of a hole, Jenny-Wren. If it wasn't me, it would be Pat."

"Oh—I *see*! But how simply topping, Maidie! Does Joy know? Oh, come and tell her, then! She's resting this morning. Primrose? What a ripping choice! Come and tell everybody!"

"I shall be proud, Madalena," Joy said warmly, as Maidlin bent over her for her morning kiss. "I'll be there, though I'm not sure if I'll go in the procession this time. If you're being crowned, I think I'd like to be audience and be able to watch you properly." And this seemed to Maidlin a good and sufficient reason.

"Miss Press-Representative," or "Miss P-R," for short, was Jen's name for Ann thereafter. Ann found herself the butt of much chaffing, which she accepted meekly and with inward amusement. A dozen times a day Rosamund hailed her as "Cooky," and suggested absurd subjects for articles; Maidlin, Nell Bell, and Kate regarded her with a touch of awe which filled her with indignation. Joy sent for her and willingly gave leave for such use of the village as "copy" as Ann might think good to make, but admitted that she would like to approve the manuscript before it was sent off; and Ann gladly promised not to publish anything without her full consent.

Monday morning brought keen disappointment to Joy, for there was no letter from Andrew. The African mail had arrived as usual, for there were letters from friends in Nairobi. So she could suppose only that her husband's "safari" had taken longer than he had expected, and that he was still out of touch with civilisation.

"He might have cabled," she said disconsolately to Jen. "He must be back by now. He might have known I'd be anxious."

"Did you cable the news of your arrival in London?" Jen asked thoughtfully. "I thought you would. Then he's sure to answer that."

But when several days had passed, and no cable had come from Kenya, Joy's disappointment turned to anxiety, and Jen began to wonder if anything could be wrong.

On her own responsibility, she rang up Kenneth, who was still in town, and told him how matters stood. "Joy's getting awfully worried, and it's bad for her. Isn't there somebody in

Nairobi you could cable to, Ken? Just ask if Andrew and Lord Saville have come back safely. Andrew's a rotter not to wire or write, now that he knows Joy's at home."

"It isn't like him. You know how he thinks for her. I don't believe they can be back yet. But I'll find out and let you know," Kenneth promised.

"It would ease Joy's mind to know he was safe in Nairobi," Jen said, as she hung up the receiver and turned away.

CHAPTER XV
A HINT OF TROUBLE

Barbara Honor, the May Queen of the year before Rosamund, arrived late at school on the opening day of the term. So she was the last in the form to hear the news.

A friend caught her for a hurried word after prayers and before the first class. “I say, Babs, you haven’t heard. Maidlin’s the new Queen—primrose! But what’s really important—the queerest thing! Rosamund has some awful row on with Pat Mercer, and they won’t look at one another. Isn’t it weird?”

“Rosamund?” Barbara said doubtfully. “It’s not the least like her. She’s so all-round decent. What is it all about?”

“Nobody knows. Something that happened in the hols. I think the Brownings were in it too, but, of course, they won’t give Pat away. Pat says she offended Ros, and she said she was sorry and apologised, and Ros wouldn’t speak to her.”

“I don’t believe that,” Babs said at once. “That wouldn’t be a scrap like Ros.”

“It’s all we can get out of any of them. You ask anybody.”

Babs did ask, as soon as she could; and in the meantime used her eyes, and found that the report was true. Rosamund and Pat were carefully avoiding one another, and Rosamund, at least, was unhappy and silent to everybody else. Pat seemed inclined to be noisy, and talked even more than usual. Gertrude and Vi were obviously in the secret, but would not betray their friend.

“All I can say,” and Barbara spoke to a circle of friends with the authority of an ex-Queen, “is that if Pat apologised and Ros wouldn’t make it up, then Pat must have done something simply awful. Ros must have been worked up fearfully before she could be like that, and Pat ought to be ashamed of herself. Ros has never been a pig to anybody yet. I want to know what it was Pat did to upset her so.”

So did everybody, but very few had the courage to ask one of the two most concerned; and those who did received no answer. Pat had said all she was prepared to tell; it was easier to pose as the injured party, whose apology had been refused, than to challenge the judgment of her companions on a very doubtful deed. In her heart she felt that the girls would uphold Rosamund.

Rosamund, on the other hand, felt that she had been thoroughly justified in her attitude and that she could never like or trust Pat again, but that this was a matter for herself, and that even to Pat she must be fair. To her, a full explanation would have seemed like an effort to prejudice the school against Pat, and she would not stoop to that. She could not forgive, but she would not drag in any one else. So neither girl would speak, and everybody was unhappy and puzzled. Maidlin admitted that she knew all about it, and she spoke to Pat only if forced to do so; but she could not explain, and so could not help.

The preparations for her Coronation went ahead rapidly. Margia Lane, the artist-fiddler to the Hamlet Club, was not busy at the moment, and set to work on the decoration of the Queen’s train as soon as she heard Maidlin’s decision and choice of flower and colour. Jen and Maidlin drove into town and chose soft, pale yellow velvet, and Margia was consulted as to the best methods of turning this into a primrose robe, and evolved new and original ideas for the occasion. The date was fixed, and the earlier Queens were invited to be present.

To the amused delight of her friends, Maidlin, having made her decision, developed a shy, quiet dignity which added a couple of years to her age, and made her fit her sixteen years, instead of seeming still a child. If she were nervous of the coming ordeal, she kept the fact to herself; she was as much reserved over this as she had been over her grief when Joy went away. She never suggested drawing back once her promise had been given; but this, Joy and Jen suspected, and Rosamund knew, was not so much a case of sticking to her word as a great resolve to help Rosamund out of her difficulty. Things were hard enough at school for Rosamund this term; but with Pat Mercer as Queen and Ros disapproving of her election, matters would have been impossible. Maidlin realised that she only could save the situation, and she went steadily forward, with a pluck and silent resolution that moved Rosamund deeply and stirred her warmest feelings of respect and gratitude.

"I'd never have believed Maidie could be such a sport," she said wistfully to Jen one day, just before the crowning. "We've thought of her as a baby; but—my hat!—she's not!"

"I'd like to know what's going on inside her all this time; whether she's in secret terror of it all, or whether she's getting any fun out of it. But with Maidie one can never tell."

"She's awfully bucked to know Joy's pleased about it. And the way Cicely drove Miriam over to congratulate Maidie bucked her up too."

"How do the girls feel about it?"

"Oh, they're pleased. They feel she may not be a very thrilling Queen; but they think she'll be a jolly one. She has come out this term, you know, Brownie! She's really trying awfully hard. She looked up all the new girls and was ripping to them, and she's sweet with the kids. She was scared for a day or two at first; but she soon found what a difference it made to do things as the Queen, and not just as Maidie di Ravarati! It's much easier when you're Queen; every one's bucked, and grins and gets conceited, when you speak to them. Maidie's finding it easier than she expected. And they all call her Primrose!"

Jen drew Maidlin on to confirm this, when she caught her alone. "Is it fun being Queen, old girl? Ros says you're Primrose already."

"In some ways it's fun," Maidlin acknowledged. "I was frightened of it, Brownie, but then I always am at first. If I go on and do things, they aren't so bad."

Jen agreed, with a laugh. "You stick to that, old thing. It's a great discovery. I'm glad the girls have been nice about it."

"They didn't want Pat for Queen," Maidlin observed shrewdly.

"I can believe that," Jen said dryly.

"They've told me so. They say she'd have been impossible now, but they don't know how they'd have got rid of her."

"So everybody's thankful to you for saving the situation. You've got the school out of a hole, as well as Ros, Maidie. It was worth it, dear kid."

"I think it was," Maidlin assented, and turned to her prep. again.

One day, when the girls were at school, Jen went to the kitchen door and called softly, "Nancy! Miss Fleet-Street! Come upstairs with me! We want you. Leave that salad for five minutes, and come to Joy's room."

"We thought you'd like to see the things Joy has brought home," she said, an eager light in her eyes. "She's been showing me and Mary-Dorothy. Don't tell the kids; they'll see them later. But Joy wanted to show us. She's been collecting the most lovely things, in Cairo and Malta and Naples and Marseilles."

With Mary and Jen, Ann hung over the delicate white garments Joy had chosen and brought home, fingering them lovingly and exclaiming at the beautiful work.

"I know one ought to make them," Joy confessed, laughing happily. "But they wouldn't have been half so nice. And I've loved buying them. I'm dying to show them to Maidie, but I think I won't. She'll see them later on."

"Rosamund won't be surprised," Ann remarked.

"Oh, Rose-of-the-World's all there, and quite up to date! But she's being very decent; she's leaving it to me to tell Maidie. Joan did want to come home with me!" Joy sighed and laughed. "And how I'd have loved to have her! She helped me to shop in Malta."

"There won't be a full muster of Queens for Madalena," Jen observed. "Joan in Malta, and Marguerite in France; will Mirry leave the baby? He's only four weeks old."

"Very doubtful. A May-Day procession is *not* for old married ladies!" Joy said solemnly, and folded up a white shawl from Malta that looked as if it could be drawn through a wedding-ring. "*I* shall not dress up and parade about the school hall! So Maidie's procession will be without violet, and pink, and green, and probably white, Queens. But I hope to go and watch my eldest daughter crowned!"

At the moment, Joy's mind was more at ease concerning her husband, for Kenneth had received an answer to his cable to the effect that Sir Andrew's expedition had not returned to Nairobi yet. The "safari" was evidently taking longer than had been expected, said Kenneth, who ran down for a day to bring the news himself and to talk reassuringly. News might come at any moment, and he had given orders for information to be cabled at once. So Joy waited quietly and hopefully, and busied herself in picking up the threads of her old home life, and hearing and seeing the results of Mary Devine's eleven months in charge. With Mary or Jen she drove much about the village, and visited the industrial centres and bits of social work she had started and Mary had carried on faithfully; the weaving school and the pottery shop; the basket-work and the lace-making factories; the girls' hostel and the babies' home and the village institute. The people, who had known her since she became mistress of the Hall at the age of sixteen, were overjoyed that she had come home to be with them at this time; they had memories of her as a wild-haired girl flying bareheaded about the country on her motor-cycle, and, earlier still, tramping the woods for miles in all weathers, when she was still merely "one of the Abbey girls." She was welcomed everywhere with delight, with smiling greetings; and in the love of her own people she was content and happy, and very thankful to be at home again.

The night before the Coronation, Kenneth came over from the Manor and had a long talk with Jen. His mother had gained enough strength to be brought home, and Kenneth was waiting anxiously for news of Andrew before making plans for himself and Jen. His return to Kenya was overdue, but was not absolutely necessary so long as Andrew was in Africa; and it seemed best for one of them to be near their mother at this time. But when Andrew was known to be on his way home, Jen knew that Kenneth would feel he ought to go back. He had spent a year at home, much longer than he had intended.

His suggestion for the immediate future was that they should be married and go out together, as Andrew and Joy had done; and that after giving Colonial life a trial, Jen should decide whether their home should be on his "shamba" or in England. She, for her part, did not want him to go alone, and had less to keep her at home now; but she shrank inexpressibly from the thought of the parting from Joy and all the Abbey circle; they were dearer than ever

now that the Hall was her home; and she had not yet given her definite consent to Kenneth's plans.

She disappeared with him into the Abbey, and they walked round and round the cloisters, talking.

A rumour had come through to Kenneth, cabled by his Nairobi agent, that disaster of some kind had overtaken the Marchwood-Saville expedition.

Jen turned white at the news. "Oh, no, Ken, not that! Not now! It would kill Joy!"

"Don't tell her. There may be nothing in it. We must wait for more. But if it should be confirmed, I should have to go at once." That was what Kenneth had come to say. "Even if there were nothing to be done, Joy would want every detail. Some one would have to go."

"Yes, Joy would wish it. But it takes weeks to get there. You couldn't do any good. Oh, it can't be true!" Jen cried brokenly. "It would kill her, Ken! How could we ever tell her?"

"It's the merest rumour at present. You mustn't let her guess. The anxiety would certainly be bad for her. But if I have to go, Jen; what then?"

Jen looked up at him quickly. "Ken, I couldn't leave Joy. Not when she was in such trouble. You wouldn't ask me to . . ."

"No, dear, I wouldn't. But I've a plan," and they walked on, he talking earnestly and she listening, and, after careful thought, agreeing fully.

"I'd like that. If you have to go—yes, Ken, I'll marry you and belong to you, and you'll leave me here to take care of Joy and your mother. I'd like to feel I was yours and Joy's, if—if that should come to her. But I can't believe it will."

"It would have to be a very hurried wedding. You'd be done out of all the fun. Of course, it would suit me better than the usual way; but I know a girl wants the real thing once in her life. It would be rough on you, Brownie."

"I'd like it," Jen said decisively. "The quieter the better for me. I couldn't have anything but a very quiet wedding this year, anyway. If you have to go for *that* reason, we shan't be feeling like weddings. We'll drop into church and be married and not say a word to anybody."

"If we waited a year or so, you could have a big affair and all the usual fuss. I hate to do you out of the fun."

"We'll have it at once, in that case. Do you think I want all the fuss? What's the quickest way one can be married? I only want to feel I've got somebody in the world really belonging to me—you and Joy, and your mother. I want a family, and my own's fallen to pieces," Jen said forlornly.

Kenneth laughed. "I'll give you your family, you poor lonely kid. I'll see to everything for you, Jenny-Wren, now and always."

"I want to be taken care of," Jen confessed.

"You shall be," Kenneth promised exuberantly, and assured her of it in the usual way.

CHAPTER XVI
QUEEN PRIMROSE

Jen had hard work that night not to go to Mary's room to share her burden with her. She dared not talk to Joy; Kenneth's fears were too much in her mind, and she could not trust herself. But to-night Joy was whispering with Maidlin, and they wanted no third.

Jen stood irresolute, longing for sympathy, but feeling it would be cruel to burden Mary with a fear that might be needless. "Mary-Dorothy feels things so. It would be brutal. And I'm not sure that she could hide it. She's so very keen on Joy; she might break down, and do Joy harm. Shall I tell Ros? No, it isn't fair; she has to go through all that ceremony to-morrow. It's bad enough for me; I can't put it on to the kid too. But I *could* run along and make Nancy comfort me! She hasn't anything to do but watch in the background, and she's nice and steady and well balanced. She won't go to pieces, as Mary-Dorothy might do. Perhaps it's mean, but I feel I can't quite bear it alone."

She crept down the corridor to Ann's room. "Nancy, may I come in? I want help, Nancy!"

Ann turned in surprise from her table, where she had been standing, reading from a little book. "Queen Brownie! How nice of you to come! What can I do? Oh, my dear, what's the trouble?"

Jen dropped wearily into a chair. "I've been pretending all evening. You heard how noisy I was, teasing Maidie and playing about with Ros? It was all put on, so that Joy shouldn't guess. I fooled them all. Oh, Nancy, we're afraid something's happened to Andrew! Ken came to tell me. What shall we do? I'm a brute to trouble you, but I couldn't bear it alone, Nancy."

Ann put her arms round her quickly. "Oh, Jenny-Wren! Surely not! Tell me all about it, dear."

Jen had been overstrained all evening, in the effort to hide her feelings. She broke down and cried in Ann's arms, told Kenneth's story and all his plans. "How can we bear it, Nancy? You're so wise and steady; you don't get upset. Tell me what we'll have to do, if this dreadful thing is true!"

Ann held her closely. "My dear, we don't know yet. You must be brave while we're waiting. If it should be true, then will be the time for all of us to help Joy to be brave. I couldn't pretend to find anything good or beautiful in such a disaster; there are times when one can only bear bravely what comes. I'd never ask Joy to believe it was God's will, or that He had taken her husband. If men go into danger without good cause, they take the risks, and their wives and children have to suffer. I feel Sir Andrew had no right to go, leaving Joy at such a time. That young Lord Saville wanted to shoot lion was no reason for other men to risk their lives. A man may, and should, risk anything to save another man's life; but not to give him amusement. It's not God's will if Joy loses her husband."

Jen looked up. "Nancy, how sane you are! How do you manage it?"

"What one can say to Joy, perhaps," Ann said slowly, "is that her husband was very brave; every one says so. He would run any risk, even for amusement, for himself or for others; he had spent his life in taking risks—she knew that when she married him. She gloried in his courage and was proud of him. Now, if the worst should come, she has to show the world that she has learnt courage from him. She has to be worthy of him. At first, she won't be able to

think ahead; but when the right time comes, you must be ready to spur her on to live bravely, Jenny-Wren. She will have some one to live for, thank God!"

Jen swallowed a sob. "Yes, if——! Oh, Nancy, you have helped! How do you always know what to say?"

"It comes, when you need it," Ann said gravely.

As Jen rose to go to bed, with the difficulty of facing the morrow's festivities in her mind, she glanced at Ann's books on the table by her bed. "Were you reading your Bible? Is that how you always know what to think about everything, Nancy?"

"And 'Brother Lawrence.' He lived in the seventeenth century, cooking in a monastery kitchen," Ann said quietly. "He lived all the time in the presence of God; and he wrote his little book to tell us how to do it. I love him; he's so practical and sane and homely."

Jen looked wistfully at the book. "Lend him to me for one night, sometime! Thank you, Nancy; and good-night. I'm so glad you're here."

As she went into her room, she heard Rosamund's door close softly. "Now where has *she* been? We are an unprincipled household! Sitting on Mary-Dorothy's fender-stool, I suppose. The way Rosamund looks up to Mary is topping; and so unexpected!"

Rosamund had, indeed, been with Mary, and had been relieved to find her alone.

She sat in silence, and Mary waited, wondering if she had come for help at last.

"I know you all think I'm being hateful about Pat Mercer," Rosamund burst out.

Mary had her usual wild impulse towards flight; to shirk the responsibility of an answer, to change the subject or to say something soothing. But she was learning that to demand and claim help meant that help would come. She waited a moment, while she asked that she might say the right words, or at least do no harm. Then she asked quietly, "Do you feel hateful about Pat?"

Rosamund looked startled. "Yes, I do. That's what's the matter, Mary-Dorothy. But I do feel I was right."

"There must be something wrong, if you're still feeling bad after all this time," Mary suggested.

"But she tricked me. I trusted her, and she let me down," Rosamund urged hotly.

"It's the hardest thing to forgive," Mary agreed. "But so long as there's something ugly in your life, you won't feel good, Ros."

Rosamund stared at her. "Mary-Dorothy, what was it that happened between you and Joy? I know there was something. She let you down somehow, but you got over it and liked her just as much as ever. That's all I know."

Mary's colour rose. "It's all I can tell you, kid. It was more than a year ago; we don't go back on things like that. But I will tell you this; it was partly my own fault. I'd had a false idea of Joy; I didn't see her as she was, but as I imagined her to be. She failed to live up to it, of course; she wasn't to blame for that. It hurt me at first. Then I realised she had never understood; that it wasn't Joy herself I had lost, but my wrong idea of her. I found the real Joy, and we became better friends than while I kept a fancy picture of her."

"Won't you tell me all about it?" Rosamund asked yearningly.

"You must remember that Pat isn't the only one to blame," Mary urged. "You opened the door for her. You knew you had no right to do that. Yet you're putting all the blame of what happened on to Pat."

"I only let them in because of the rain!" Rosamund said sharply, yet stirred uneasily because she knew it was an excuse.

Mary was ready for her. “But you’d planned it with her. That’s where you were wrong,” she retorted quickly. “You planned to do a forbidden thing; then when you tried to get out of it, you found you couldn’t. And now you’re blaming Pat.”

Rosamund reddened, her conscience reinforcing Mary’s argument. “You see things too clearly, Mary-Dorothy.”

“It’s never been said of me before,” Mary said curtly. “The trouble has been the other way about. Rosamunda, you’ll never have an easy mind till you clear this mess up.”

“Well, I don’t see how to do it,” and Rosamund rose wearily. “I’d better go to bed, considering all the fuss to-morrow. Good-night, Mary-Dorothy.”

She went off without a word of thanks, and Mary sat wondering if she had helped or hindered. She had said things she had never planned to say, things which had seemed necessary at the moment. She could only hope they would serve some useful purpose, and that Rosamund would think them over and find help.

It was not to be wondered at that Rosamund and Jen, both heavily burdened, should throw themselves into the excitement of Maidlin’s Coronation, as much to escape from their own troubles as from a desire to make the ceremony a success. They were up early, and both were apparently full of high spirits all day.

They met by accident in the garden, long before any one else was awake. Jen, dressing quietly, with some idea of gathering primroses as a compliment to the new Queen, saw Rosamund crossing the dew-drenched lawn. She hurried into her green linen frock, and crept downstairs and out by the garden door they used on these occasions, and went racing after Rosamund.

“Where to, Rose-of-the-World?”

“To get fresh primroses in the wood, for Maidie.”

“Let me come too!” Jen pleaded. “Is Her Majesty still asleep?”

“Sound. I say, Brownie, listen!” and Rosamund told her plan.

Jen laughed. “Cheers! I’ll help. Good for you, Ros!” And they ran to the nearest little wood, and gathered till their baskets were full.

When Maidlin woke, she found two primroses lying on her pillow; sitting up, she found two more in her black hair. She disentangled them carefully, flushing at thought of the eventful day before her; and found more primroses strewn over her pink quilt.

“It’s Ros,” and she laughed. “I must have been sound asleep. I shall be late for breakfast; these mustn’t be squashed.”

When she had gathered them all, she stepped out of bed, and just in time saw two primroses in each shoe. She rescued them, and picked two more off her stockings.

“They’re all in twos,” she said thoughtfully. “I expect Brownie’s been here too,” and she looked at every article before she touched it.

There were two primroses stuck in her sponge, and two more on her towel. There were two on her brush and two in her comb, and two on her folded hair-ribbon. Two were laid on her Bible, and two on her frock, and two within the coil of her strap belt. She collected them all with care, and went down to breakfast with both hands full.

“Mary-Dorothy, look!” she said.

“Look, Queen Primrose!” Mary retorted laughing, and showed two primroses on Maidie’s plate, two in her spoon, two on her letters, two in her saucer, and two on her chair.

“Seem to think I’m twins!” the Queen-elect said pensively, spreading her flowers in a circle round her plate; and carefully removed two from her chair before sitting down.

"Congrats., old chap! And thanks awfully!" Rosamund appeared at the garden door.

Jen bent over Maidlin from behind and kissed her. "A happy crowning and a happy reign to you, Queen Primrose, dear!"

"Look, Brownie!"

"Yes, aren't they lovely? They're so fresh. Have you been out to the woods?"

"No, but you and Ros have," Maidlin said happily. "Thank you, Brownie. Thank you, Ros!"

To Maidlin's relief, and she was quite frank about it, she was to have one Coronation only. The custom of the Hamlet Club demanded two, the first and more private ceremony at Broadway End for the benefit of the President's grandparents and for a few chosen and intimate friends, the second at the big school in Wycombe. But old Mrs. Broadway was lying seriously ill, so only the public crowning was to take place. Mr. Broadway could not leave his wife, but he had sent his gift to the new Queen, the silver medal inscribed—"Queen Maidlin was crowned by the Hamlet Club as its twelfth Queen"—and the date.

With Joy, Maidlin, Mary, and Mrs. Shirley, who was feeling stronger and was anxious to see Maidlin crowned, the car from the Hall was full. So Kenneth came round with his big car, and took Jen, Rosamund, and Ann Rowney, while Nelly Bell and Kate joined a party from the village, and the chauffeur's wife was left in charge of the house for the afternoon and evening.

On reaching the school, Joy and her aunt, and Mary, were led to front seats by the head mistress, Miss Macey; and Kenneth and Ann joined them; while the girls disappeared into the big classroom in which all the old Queens were putting on their coloured trains, and Margia Lane was waiting to dress the new Queen.

"What a pretty robe, Madalena!" and Cicely Everett, the President, came forward in her golden train and crown of yellow tulips. "It's two shades deeper than Barbara's cream-and-roses, and two shades paler than mine. And the border and lining are most original, Margia."

"I had to make it different from Babs's," Margia explained. "I'm rather proud of yours, and that's the truth, Maidlin."

"I'm *very* proud. Thank you very much," Maidlin took refuge in her shy reserved dignity.

Miriam, the first Queen, in her white robe with its forget-me-not border, and Muriel and Nesta, and Barbara with her creamy robe embroidered with pink wild roses, came up eagerly to see the long train Margia was unwrapping; while Rosamund hurriedly began to brush and plait Maidlin's long black hair.

"This is my job. She's to wear it my way for once. It will suit her crown better," she insisted. "You know Joy agreed, Maidie."

Maidlin submitted meekly to having the thick hair drawn forward to frame her face and braided in two long plaits on her breast. She was very quiet and composed, but her burning cheeks and very bright dark eyes betrayed her suppressed excitement.

"There! A white narcissus crown will look topping on you now," Rosamund said warmly. "Now dress her, Margia. I must tog myself up," and she retreated to a corner to don her crimson train with its big white and yellow roses. The hot-houses at the Hall and the Manor had supplied early roses for her crown, which she wore for the first time, as during the year she had been entitled to the forget-me-nots of the ex-Queen.

In another corner, Jen was robing herself in her bright brown train, with its pattern of yellow dancing flowers and leaves, and calling remarks to Beatrice, whose gaudy robe had given her the nickname of "old Stripey."

"I say, Stripes, I consider that thing of yours absolutely flashy. It's ostentatious, that's what it is. What colour do you call it, anyway?"

"Jazz," said a voice from the crowd.

"It's been very much admired," 'Stripes' said indignantly, looking down at her gorgeous colouring. "It's most unusual."

"It is, thanks be. Good thing there aren't many like it. We're gaudy enough as it is. One of you's plenty.'

"Dingy old brown doormat, that's what yours is," Beatrice said disdainfully.

Maidlin had yielded willingly to Margia Lane's dictum that no one ought to think of a primrose without its leaves, and that a plain yellow train would be too near in colour to Barbara's choice of cream. So Margia had lined the velvet robe with green, of the exact shade of a primrose leaf, and had given the soft yellow of the upper side a broad green border to match. On the green were painted primroses, scattered up and down and all along; and the effect was beautiful and unusual, and unlike any other in the long procession of Queens.

Maidlin's promotion had left Rosamund without a Maid, so she had chosen Sheila Jessop, to Shee's intense delight. Maidlin, with no very intimate friend at school, had willingly accepted Rosamund's suggestion that Sheila's chum Phyllis should be given the coveted honour; and the two juniors, in their wild excitement and their efforts to help their elders, added to the confusion in the dressing-room. Sheila wore the crimson girdle and embroidery which matched Rosamund's robe, and with her brown curls she looked exceedingly pretty, and showed that she knew it. Phyllis was fair, with a smooth little shingled head, and the yellow and green touches of colour on her white frock suited her; she held up Maidlin's train with care, and when the time came was most punctilious in arranging it to show the lining and the border to the best advantage.

"Are you kids ready?" demanded the President. "They've begun dancing."

"Are you referring to me, Madam President?" Miriam, the mother of three children, came to lead the procession.

"I'm referring to anybody who's chattering, but chiefly to those two rowdy young Maids of Honour. Calm yourselves, children! Be dignified!" and Cicely followed the White Queen out and up the big hall, where the dancing lines of "Speed the Plough" fell apart to let them pass, and cheered each Queen for old times' sake.

Jen, wearing a wreath of faded white flowers, came last. On the platform, when all were grouped around the empty flower-decked throne, Rosamund removed the dying flowers and replaced them with a forget-me-not wreath, and the girls, who loved "Brownie" and knew the story of her troubled reign, cheered in sympathy. Jen, with no shyness, made a speech of thanks and apology for the "bad sort of Queen" she had been, of necessity, and gratefully acknowledged the help given by Rosamund during her enforced absence. Then she came down the hall again, followed by her tiny Maid, to lead in the new Queen.

Maidlin, left alone in the classroom, would have been a prey to a sudden spasm of nerves. Joy had foreseen this, however, and had whispered a word to Mary; and while everybody was watching the procession pass up the hall, Mary had slipped out to join Maidlin, and they had watched Jen's ceremony and listened to her speech together. The mere presence of a friend had been enough to keep Maidlin steady, and she was composed and full of dignity as she met Jen with a brave little smile.

Jen kissed her in the doorway. "Plucky kid! Come along; hold your flowers nicely. They'll love you; you look a picture, Primrose. And Joy is so proud and happy!"

She turned away quickly, lest Maidlin should see the pain in her face, at remembrance of what lay behind. But Maidie and her little Maid were in trouble over the yellow train, and did not notice; and Jen was thankful that she was the only one who knew. That there was courage in her own bearing of the burden did not occur to her.

Maidlin's eyes drooped shyly as she followed Jen up the hall, her starry crown carried before her on a yellow cushion with green corner tassels; her usually pale cheeks had spots of bright colour, and with the soft black hair framing her clear-cut little face, she was, as the girls whispered, prettier than ever, and a striking contrast to the three fair Queens who had come before her. Her bearing was full of shy, almost frightened, dignity, and she was composed and resolute and outwardly unafraid. If she shrank from the crowd and noise, her wish to help Rosamund and to please Joy was strong enough to enable her to hide it.

Jen led her to her throne, and crowned her, and kissed her again. Maidlin curtseyed to the Queens around her, to the visitors, and to the school. Then, to the everlasting surprise of every one but Rosamund—and, as a matter of fact, to the surprise of the Rose Queen also—Maidie stepped forward, as if to speak.

An amazed hush fell; the girls had been sure there would be no Queen's speech this year. Joy and Jen had assured "Primrose" she need not make that effort; Rosamund had expected her to funk this at the last moment.

In the silence, Maidlin's clear strong voice pealed out, in the words Rosamund had proposed for her, "I'm glad to be Queen."

Cicely Everett collapsed in silent laughter, at sound of the old tune to which she had set words for Joy's crowning, so many years ago. She nudged Miriam, who had sung her words; but Miriam, and the thunderstruck Joy, were intent only on Maidie's voice and her courage. Miriam was a singer herself, and knew how to appreciate the future for Maidlin's voice. Joy was full of music, but of late years she had allowed her gift to lie almost unused, in the press of other duties; as Maidlin sang, Joy's dreams were stirred to life again, and she saw herself, later on, writing songs for her adopted daughter to sing.

At the end of the one little verse, Maidlin stopped, bowed to the crowd, and sat down. The hall rang with delighted applause; but Maidlin looked appealingly up at Jen, and Jen signalled to the music to begin for the dancing to continue. Margia's fiddle rang out triumphantly in "Haste to the Wedding," and the girls caught their partners' hands and ran to form in long lines and to "number from the top," while the audience sitting below the platform reversed their chairs and sat with their backs to the Queens to watch the revels.

"Surprising Maidie!" Joy murmured, as Kenneth placed her seat for her. "She takes my breath away!"

"You hadn't known she was going to sing?"

"Gracious, no! I wonder who made up the words for her?"

"Rosamund's pink cheeks looked eloquent," said he. "I fancy she had a hand in it."

"She was the only one who wasn't surprised," said Mary. "Ros was merely intensely amused. She'd known it was coming, I'm sure."

During an interval, after some country-dances and the plaiting of the maypole—whose ribbons were white and pale yellow and green, out of compliment to the new Queen, with a strand of light brown for Jen—the girls and the guests presented their gifts, and Maidlin received them and thanked each giver with a shy graciousness which was very charming.

Joy watched her, stunned and enthralled. "The child's coming out of her shell every hour. Taking on this job has done her immense good. She's a different girl from the frightened

mouse she used to be. Is it all since I came home? Or had she changed while I was away, but I didn't notice it at first?"

Mary and Jen, standing together, glanced at one another. Jen gave the answer. "It wasn't while you were away. She was like a chrysalis, waiting for the time to come; a primrose bud waiting for the sun! We were worried because she seemed so shut up and childish and far away. But I don't believe it's your coming home that has opened her bud. It's the fact of having made a great effort, for Ros, whom she thinks the world of. She feels for the first time that she has done something worth while. She has really helped; she's no longer 'just Maidie.' Everybody is pleased with her, and she feels she has risen to the occasion. It's doing her all the good in the world. She's expanding and losing her shyness with every little effort she makes."

"I think you're right," Mary said thoughtfully.

"I am, Mary-Dorothy," the Brown Queen said calmly. "Writing your book, and teaching your class in town, and running Joy's house, all did the same thing for you. You came out, and changed, and were less shy and frightened, because you felt you'd done something worth while."

Mary coloured quickly, but said nothing.

Jen laughed. "I'm right again, Mary-Dorothy. Now the Queens will walk about and talk to people, and have food brought to them; so we can go and congratulate Primrose. Come along, 'Traveller's Joy.' All the old Queens want to speak to you."

"I'm going home quite soon, with Auntie," said Joy. "I'm a little tired; Maidie has been such an unexpected success that I'm quite worn out with surprise and delight! We won't stay for the party. But the rest of you must wait and dance; Ken will bring you all home."

Maidlin came up to her, her long train carried carefully by Phyllis. "Was it all right, Joy? Were you pleased?"

Joy kissed her. "Primrose, I'm prouder of you than I've ever been before. You've been a beautiful Queen. We'll talk it all over to-night. I loved your little song! Did Rosamunda make the words?"

The Rose Queen heard, and curtseyed. "Madam, I did. And she said they were doggerel."

"They were," said Maidlin. "But my speech would have been worse."

"It was my tune," said Joy. "I always think of my crowning when I hear that tune. Maidie, I shall go home before the party, with Auntie, and perhaps Mary or Nancy. We'll take some of your gifts, if you like. Ask the girls to put them in the car for you."

"I'll go home with you," Mary said quickly. "I'd like Nancy to dance. I danced at Brownie's party last year."

"I shall dance with Nancy. We might have 'Nancy's Fancy' for her benefit," said Rosamund.

Then the Queens withdrew to their thrones, and the country-dancing began again.

CHAPTER XVII
A TERRIBLE NIGHT

Following the custom initiated by Jen the year before, the official crowning ceremony was followed by a short country-dance party, in which the Queens took part, their robes and long trains laid aside. Maidlin's dancing-frock of daffodil yellow, and Rosamund's golden brown, were waiting in the dressing-room, with Jen's short blue one; all who could stay changed hurriedly and ran out to have some dancing for themselves. Miriam went home to her tiny baby, and Cicely to her old grandparents, and Joy drove off with Mrs. Shirley and Mary in a car heaped with Maidlin's presents and finery.

"It's the first Coronation Joan's missed," said Muriel, as she went to dance with Maidlin. "I was her Maid of Honour, you know; Jen took my place when I was made Queen. It's queer not to have Joan here."

"She wanted to come home with Joy," said Rosamund. "But she couldn't leave Jack and Janice alone in Malta. Make a set for 'Hey, Boys' with Nancy and me, will you?" and she went to find Ann, and insisted on her joining in. "We'll have 'Nancy's Fancy' presently. You shall dance that with Primrose, Nancy. It's a terrific honour to dance with her now; you do understand that, don't you?"

"Or with you, I suppose," Ann retorted. "I don't feel so much afraid now you've changed into short frocks. I'd have felt too crushed to dance if you'd come and asked me in your crown and robes."

"My hat! Think of doing 'Hey, Boys' in a train!" said Rosamund. "We never used to get any of the fun. This party stunt at the end was Jenny-Wren's idea a year ago. The Queens always used to be dying to dance. So now we shall bless Brownie at every Coronation," she called over her shoulder to Jen, in the next set.

"Glad you've such good sense! Why?"

"Because you tacked on this party to the Coronation, and let the Queens have some of the fun."

"Glad I did," Jen nodded, and turned to her partner, Nesta.

Every one wanted to dance with "Primrose," and it was an exhausted Queen and a very tired company who crowded into Kenneth's big car at the end of the evening. Maidlin was too worn out to speak, but she was very happy; Jen and Rosamund could still chatter, though both were subdued by sheer weariness. Ann Rowney had enjoyed her party and her evening with the Hamlet Club thoroughly, and had been asked to join in every dance, because she was a friend of so many Queens.

The car drew up at the door of the Hall. The door was standing open and light was streaming out.

Mary came running out, her hand raised in warning. "Please be very quiet! Oh, Jen! Maidie! Ann!" and for a moment she choked, and leaned on the door of the car, her head dropping on her hands.

Kenneth was at her side in an instant. Jen, her heart standing still, pushed past the girls and Ann. "Mary, *what is it*?" But in her heart she knew, and her eyes met Kenneth's in despair.

Maidlin, white to the lips, gave a little sob and fell back in her corner; she was in no state for a shock, after the strain of the day; and Mary's attitude told of disaster. Rosamund, shaking

with fear, yet was able to control herself and slip an arm round Maidie.

"Mary, is it an accident? Joy?" she whispered.

Maidlin quivered, and moaned, and hid her face. "Oh, Mary, tell us!" she sobbed.

Mary looked up bravely. "I'm sorry. But we've had an awful time. There was a telegram waiting for Joy, a cable from Nairobi,"—Jen groaned. Kenneth said something savage below his breath. "I couldn't stop her; she read it, and cried out for Andrew, and fainted. I caught her as she fell; I don't think she hurt herself. We got her to bed; fortunately Nelly and Kate and Mrs. Summers were here to help. We rang up the doctor, and he came, and is coming in again later. The nurse is here; everything is being done for her. But such a shock was the worst possible thing for her, and she is very ill. Jen, I couldn't help it."

"Dear, of course not," Jen had recovered quickly from the blow. "I ought not to have let her come home alone. Ken and I knew there was trouble, but we never dreamed of any one interfering like this. We weren't going to tell Joy till we were sure."

"Who is the fool?" Kenneth asked bitterly. "We were trying to save her from this, Mary. Is there any definite news? We'd only heard a rumour."

"The cable's in there," Mary said; and he strode past her into the house. She looked at Jen. "It asks if Joy can confirm the rumour that Sir Andrew's expedition has met with disaster and all are lost. I am sure she had never dreamt of bad news."

"We saw she wasn't afraid," Jen said brokenly. "I'd have done anything to save her from this shock. To think we stayed to enjoy ourselves! I ought to have warned you to keep telegrams from her. But I don't suppose you could have done it."

"I don't think it would have been possible. Jen, don't you think the girls should go to the Manor for a night or two?"

"I'm not going to be sent away as if I were a baby. I want to help; I'll sit up all night; I'll do anything," Rosamund urged feverishly. "Jen, don't ask us to go away!"

"Jen, let me go to Joy!" pleaded Maidlin.

Jen looked at them in despair. Then she said decisively, "My dear kids, you have the hardest thing to do for Joy to-night. The fewer people there are about the better. I know you'd be quiet, but you wouldn't be able to keep away. You can choose whether you'll go with Ken to the Manor, to be with his mother, or whether you'll sleep in the Abbey with Maidie's auntie, in her little extra room. That's the nearest I can allow you to be. I'll come for you, or ring you up at the Manor, if we think you ought to come—if Joy seems to want you. But at present she's too ill, I suppose," and she looked at Mary.

"Much too ill," Mary said brokenly. "They won't let any of us in. I've packed a few things for them, Jen. Maidie, dear, don't cry like that! It hurts us all. It is hard on you; we all feel that."

"Ros, *could* you take this in a grown-up way, and do what we think is best, without questioning, and forget yourself in helping Maidie?" Jen pleaded, a quiver in her voice. She was nearly heartbroken with fear for Joy, and she felt a tussle with Rosamund would quite break her down. "Ros, I want to help Joy, but if I have to coax and argue with you, I shall go all to pieces. I can't bear it. Won't you help me, Ros?"

Rosamund's voice shook, as she answered, "I'll do anything you like, Jen. I don't think we'd be in the way, but if you'd rather we weren't here, of course we'll go. The Abbey's nearer; we'll go there. But come and tell us how Joy is, or send somebody. You know the state we'll be in."

"I will, Ros. You shall know as soon as there's anything to tell. Ken, will you take them into the Abbey, with this suitcase? Tell Mrs. Watson what has happened, and ask her to give them a good supper and to make up the bed in Joy's little room."

"Oh, we shan't go to bed," Rosamund said drearily. "Are you going to bed? Well, then! But we'll clear out of the way and keep quiet."

Ann Rowney had slipped away while Jen was pleading with Rosamund. She ran up to her room and hurriedly changed her white frock for a dark working suit and big overall. Then she went down to the kitchen, and found Kate in tears, as she had expected, and Nelly Bell wandering round helplessly, anxious to be of use, but with no idea what to do. Ann took charge, put big kettles on the gas stove and relit the kitchen range, to be ready for all emergencies; and then began to prepare supper for Mrs. Shirley and Mary and Jen, for the two girls and herself.

Jen, hurrying up to change her frock, glanced in and saw her busily at work. "That's good of you, Nancy. But how like you to get to business, and be practical, and not lose your head!"

"I know you'll tell us when there's any news, and it's easier to be busy than to wait," Ann said quietly. "Nelly says Mrs. Shirley hasn't had anything to eat, though they've got her to bed; so that's the first thing."

"I'm going to her, as soon as I've changed. I can't do anything else for Joy, but I can do that. Auntie Shirley must have had a terrible shock," Jen said pitifully. "I shall stay with her all night if she wants me."

A few minutes later, Ann carried up a tray to Mrs. Shirley's room, with cocoa and hot milk, and scrambled eggs, and a plate of ham. She spread the table, laying places for three.

"I'll send Mary here, shall I? You'll like to be together. You must feed properly, Jenny-Wren. You've forgotten how hungry you are, but you'll be fainting in an hour or two, if you don't take care. Remember how hard you were dancing a little while ago."

"I wish I hadn't been," Jen said vehemently. "I know it's silly, but I'd give anything *not* to have been dancing to-night."

"That is *very* silly," Ann said firmly, and went to call Mary.

Mary came gladly; she had just realised her need of food, and that Mrs. Shirley's and Jen's must be still greater; and it was an inexpressible relief to find a hot meal ready without having to think about it.

"You're a real treasure, Nancy," she said warmly.

"May I go and ask if the nurse wants anything?"

"She doesn't. I asked her before she went up. She's to ring if she wants us."

"Then I'm going to feed you and Jen at intervals during the night, and be on hand if anything is wanted in a hurry."

"You are a comfort!" Mary sighed gratefully. "But what about your own supper, Nancy? You've been dancing; I haven't."

"I'll have mine downstairs. Nelly and Kate need bucking up; yes, it's better. You and Jen will help one another." Ann paused in the doorway. "Mary-Dorothy, those poor girls in the Abbey will be in a dreadful state. You or I should run along to them when we can, even if there's nothing to tell. It would help them just to see somebody. I'll go gladly, if you think I can be spared best."

"Thank you very much. I'll tell Jen," and Mary went up to Mrs. Shirley's room.

Kenneth came back from the Abbey for a good-night word with Jen. "Can I do anything—fetch anything—go anywhere—help in any way? Not? Then I'll run the car home to the

Manor and break all this to mother," he said, his face stern at the thought of that telling. "We can't keep it from her now. But it won't do her any good."

"Tell her I'll come to her as soon as I can leave Joy," Jen said sympathetically. "We keep forgetting that Andrew means more to her and you than to any of us, except Joy. It looks as if you'd have to go, Ken."

"I think it will come to that. I can be ready quite quickly. If I do, Jenny-Wren——?" and he looked his question.

"I'll be ready whenever you want me, Ken. I couldn't let you go without feeling I belonged to you."

"I feel the same. You know what I want, Brownie," and he kissed her and left her.

In the Abbey, Rosamund had assumed a tone of authority which was very good for Maidlin. She unpacked the case Mary had sent, and found, as she expected, morning jumpers and skirts besides their night garments.

"Take off that dancing frock, Maidie, and hop into your jumper; and there's your sports' coat. Are you going to bed? I thought not; neither am I, of course. But you must be dressed for a night out. We'll have some supper and then go into the Abbey. Perhaps it will be comforting. Change into thicker shoes too; we must be sensible, or Jen will have some reason to say things."

Mrs. Watson was hastily warming some soup, and presently set a good meal before the girls. Maidlin was quiet and had stopped crying, but her eyes had a stunned look of bewildered helplessness which went to Rosamund's heart. All day Rosamund had been feeling warm gratitude to Maidlin; now, in the terrible shock of this homecoming, she found her call to forget herself in doing her share for Maidie, and she rose to the occasion bravely.

She coaxed and pleaded and scolded gently, till Maidlin had forced herself to swallow a little food. Then Ros wrapped her in her big coat and a knitted cap, took cushions and a rug, and made a camp in a corner of the cloisters, on the stone steps leading to the garth. From there they could watch the gateway through which news from the Hall would come.

"Your auntie means well, Primrose, but she talks too much. Doesn't know when to stop. We know every word she's said so far about Joy; we don't need her to tell us."

"No," said Maidlin. "What has happened to Andrew, Ros?" It was the first question she had asked.

"I don't think they know. But I could see Jen's afraid he won't come back. Of course, the shock of hearing suddenly has nearly—has upset Joy very much; so they've put her to bed and have sent for the doctor."

"Has nearly killed her, you were going to say," Maidlin shivered. "Ros, why do these things happen?"

Rosamund was not prepared to answer such a question. "I don't know, Maidie. It seems awfully hard; it's all wrong. I can't tell you why."

"I hope Andrew will come back. He pulled me out of the pond," said Maidlin.

"And brought you back to life when you were drowned. Joy always says she owes you to him. I hope he'll come back too. I always remember that he saved you when Biddy and I had nearly done for you," Rosamund said gloomily.

Maidlin shook herself free from the rugs. "I want to walk about. I shall scream if I have to sit still."

"All right, old thing," Rosamund said soothingly, and looked at her anxiously. "We'll come back to this corner when we're tired."

They roamed restlessly about among the ruins, through the cloisters, and the monks' dormitory, and the chapter-house, and the refectory. At intervals they rested on the rugs, and Rosamund went to Mrs. Watson and demanded hot coffee and biscuits, or hot cocoa and buns, and fed Maidie by sheer force of insistence. For the sake of peace Maidlin yielded, and ate a little to satisfy her.

They sat for a while below the rose window in the sacristy, Joy's favourite place in the Abbey; and Rosamund talked cheerfully, without any thought of the heroism of her complete self-forgetfulness. They were sitting on their cushions having a little meal when Ann Rowney appeared at the end of the tresaunt passage. Maidlin's cup went flying and crashed on the steps, and she raced across the dew-drenched garth to hurl herself on Ann.

"Oh, Nancy, how is Joy? Tell us, Nancy!"

"My dears, there's nothing to tell yet," Ann said pitifully. "The doctor is staying here for the present, and there's a nurse too, so she has every care. No one can do any more. You can ask God to help her; you ought to be doing that. We're doing all we can. I came to bring your warmer coats. We knew you wouldn't have gone to bed."

Maidlin put on her coat submissively, struggling with sobs she was trying to keep down. Ann put her arm round her. "You poor dear! After your happy day, it's more than hard."

"Nancy, why did God let this happen?" Rosamund asked stormily. "How can we ask Him to help Joy? He's made her ill!"

"My dear, that's simply not true," Ann said steadily "She's ill because of the cruel thoughtlessness of the person who sent that cable."

"Well, couldn't He have stopped it coming?"

"No," Ann said bluntly.

"Can't He do everything?"

"No," said Ann again.

"Nancy, what do you mean?"

"That He doesn't interfere with our wills," Ann said briefly. "We're free to act as we like. I'll tell you what I mean, Rosamund. You *know*, in your heart, that your quarrel with that girl at school is wrong; that there would be no quarrels in a perfect world. You can't pretend it could be God's wish that you should hate anybody, whatever she has done. But He doesn't *make* you forgive her; it's left to you to choose. If you choose to go on hating Pat, He will be sorry, for He can't be pleased with hatred; but He'll leave it to you. What He will do, and is doing, I believe, is to make you uncomfortable whenever you think about her. That is His way of persuading you; but He won't force you. And if Sir Andrew Marchwood went off on a dangerous expedition and risked his life so that he and another man should have the fun of shooting big game, it's wrong to say God is to blame. If Joy's friends couldn't think of her welfare, again you're wrong to blame Him."

Rosamund had given her a startled look at the illustration of herself and Pat Mercer. She said nothing now, but stood looking down and playing with the ends of her long plaits. Ann left the new ideas to do their work, and turned to comfort Maidlin and to urge her to courage.

Once during the night Mary came, with no news, but to bring an anxious query from Jen as to how Maidie was standing the strain. She told that Mrs. Shirley had fallen asleep, that Jen was sitting in her room, and that Nancy in the kitchen was being splendid, ready to supply any want of the nurse, to cheer up Nelly and Kate, and to produce coffee or soup or tea at a moment's notice for anybody who fancied it.

"The longest night I've ever known," Rosamund said drearily, and was glad when Maidlin fell asleep in her arms from sheer exhaustion, as she could not think of one more comforting word to say.

She sat holding her bravely, and leaning against the wall, till at last she fell asleep herself also. Maidlin's head slid down into her lap and she murmured a word but did not wake. Dawn crept over the Abbey and the gardens, and at last sunshine flooded the garth and poured down on the sleeping girls. Rosamund stirred, but slept on.

Mrs. Watson was sleeping in her chair before the fire. The kettle boiled over, and she woke, and went out to see why there had been no demand for hot drinks from Rosamund. She stood looking down at the crumpled heap of weary girls, but wisely decided not to wake them. Spreading another rug gently over them, she left them to sleep.

"Time enough for trouble when they wake, poor lambs! Good thing they can forget. Don't you wake 'em, now," and she shook her fist at a thrush, who had perched on the highest corner of the refectory roof, and was shouting his joy that it was another fine day.

But Maidlin and Rosamund were too far away to hear him. They slept quietly, and the Abbey lay in early morning sunny peace.

In the quiet house beyond the Abbey walls, Mrs. Shirley lay asleep. Ann Rowney had gone to lie down, and had bidden Nelly Bell do the same, since there might be more for them to do later on, and they would be more ready to help if they had rested. So they lay down half dressed, ready to come at any moment.

Jen and Mary could not rest. Joy was nearer to both of them than to any of the others. Jen wandered quietly about, restless and uneasy, longing to help but knowing there was nothing she could do. A trip to the Abbey showed her that the girls were asleep; she envied them, and went back to the house, and up to Mary's room.

Mary was sitting over a tiny gas fire, the lights turned out, since dawn was very near. She looked up gladly as Jen appeared.

"Do come and sit down, Brownie! I know it's hard, but you'll tire yourself out, and to-morrow you'll be sorry. After the party, you must be sore with tiredness."

"To-morrow!" said Jen, and dropped wearily into a chair. "If I could think of to-morrow without being afraid! What if we should lose Joy? Mary, I was upset about Andrew, but I never dreamed of anything so terrible as losing Joy. What if this shock kills her? It might, you know."

Mary brought her a cup of tea. "Drink this, Brownie, and eat something. It's hardest on you. We all love Joy, but she means most to you. But I don't believe she'll die. There's the chance, I know, and we can't shut our eyes to it. But it isn't at all likely, and I don't believe it will happen."

Jen put down the cup and stared at her. "Mary-Dorothy, why? If you can give me something to hang on to to-night, I'll love you for ever."

Mary stood looking down at her; later, she realised that in her intense desire to help, she had forgotten herself and everything, and for the first time had not had that wild impulse towards flight which any crisis had hitherto aroused in her.

"Joy's twenty-three, and very strong. She has always been healthy and well. I don't see why even a shock at this time should kill her. She'll rally, and presently she'll be happy again, though perhaps in a different way. She'll have a lot to comfort her."

"If she lives, yes!" Jen quivered. "But she's very ill, Mary. Her strength may not hold out."

“I feel there are times when we can’t look forward, and so we have to look backwards for help,” Mary said gravely. “If you look back carefully, I’m sure you’ll find a whole series of ‘lucky’ things that have happened. I’ll tell you a few of them. Your turning up in our office and my being chosen for your father’s typing; it saved my health and changed my life. Your knowledge of Kenneth’s love for you, before you heard of your father’s illness; you weren’t engaged, but in the background of your trouble there must always have been the thought of Kenneth.”—Jen nodded, listening wide-eyed. “Your engagement, coming in time for your father to know and be glad of it, and for you to feel safe and cared for when your mother went. My strange little meeting with Sir Andrew at that concert, so that when the time came and Joy’s happiness was at stake, I knew him just well enough to be able to help. Much farther back, there are things I’ve only heard about. The ‘chance’ that brought you to the Hall, the only one out of all the school, and laid the foundation of your friendship with Joan and Joy; the ‘chance’ that brought Maidie to stay at the Abbey with her aunt, just when the news came of her inheritance, which drove Mrs. Watson to Joy for help; and so brought about all the happiness of Maidie’s living here. The ‘chance’ meeting of Joan and Captain Raymond at a summer Vacation School, through the ‘chance’ friendship of Cicely and Mr. Everett. The ‘chance’ visit of the schoolgirls to the Abbey eight years ago, which brought Cicely into touch with Joan and Joy. Brownie, we could go on for ever so long. A whole chain of ‘chances,’ all making for happiness. Do you really believe it has been just luck? Or is there Love behind, guiding the world? Can’t you believe that all will still be well, since all has been so very well this far? Joy may be taken from us; but it’s far more likely, judging from the past, that she’ll pull through, and we shall be happy again. Isn’t it rather forgetful to be so much afraid?”

Jen drank her tea, and squared her shoulders, and sat up. “Mary-Dorothy, you’re right. Thank you for walking into me. I was getting into a panic, and it was wrong. I think it was chiefly tiredness. I will remember; I won’t be ungrateful. We have been helped, and always for the best; and there’s no such thing as luck or chance. I do believe in God, and in Love. I won’t forget again.—What was that?” She sprang up, at a sudden new sound in the quiet house.

Mary’s face lit up, and they looked at one another in new hope and eagerness.

“Come and see!” Jen whispered, trembling with excitement. “Hold my hand, Mary-Dorothy! I believe it’s going to be all right. Come and see!” and they crept hand in hand down the corridor towards Joy’s room.

CHAPTER XVIII
MAIDLIN'S LITTLE SISTERS

"Oh, Joy Shirley, how *could* you?" Jen, half laughing, half sobbing, ran through the garden to the Abbey. "You might have managed *one* boy! I wonder if you'll mind very much?"

For one moment, she stood looking down at Ros and Maidie. "Poor dear kiddies! It's been frightfully hard on them. But we couldn't help it. They'll have to go to bed to-day. Ros! Maidie, dear! Wake up! Such wonderful news! Are you awake enough to understand?"

"Jen—Joy?" Maidlin, half-waking, had one thought only.

"Joy's all right. The doctor says she'll pull through now. The most wonderful thing has happened, dear kids. *Two* tiny babies have come, to comfort Joy and help her to bear it, if Andrew doesn't come home. Two beautiful wee red-haired girls, just like Joy and Joan!"

"Twins!" shouted Rosamund, and bubbled over with delighted laughter. "Oh, I say, what a joke! *More* Abbey girls! Oh, but I say, Brownie! One ought to have been a boy!"

"Jen, is it true?" Maidlin whispered, utter incredulous amazement in her face. "Joy with two babies? Jen, I can't believe it!"

"Neither can I," Jen assured her warmly. "We'll let you see them later. Your little nieces, Maidie!"

"No, my sisters," Maudlin whispered. "Joy said, if—if ever she had babies, they'd be my brothers and sisters, and that's how I feel. She's been my mother, Jen."

"Well, perhaps she has, kid. You must think of names for them. *Them!* Joy's *children*! Doesn't it sound queer?"

"Oh, they'll be Joan and Joy, you bet!" said Rosamund. "Reddy, did you say? Both of them? What fun! But if Andrew doesn't come back, I guess Joy will wish one had been a boy, Jenny-Wren. I suppose Ken will have to be Sir Kenneth, and you—my hat! You'll be Lady Marchwood too. How rummy, Jenny-Wren!"

Jen flushed. "I wish one had been a boy, and I'm sure Ken will. But we have to put up with these little things," she said sturdily. "I expect Joy will be a little sorry, but she'll love her babies. Come and ask Mrs. Watson for a big breakfast, and tell her the news."

"When did it happen, Brownie? Have you seen them yet?" Maidlin pleaded. "And when may we?"

"Not yet. The nurse said when I went back I should see them for a second. I'll try to wangle a peep for you too. She says they're beautiful babies, perfect in every way, but very tiny. They'll soon grow. They can yell; I can tell you that!"

Rosamund collapsed in delighted laughter again. "Joy's twins! I can't get used to the idea! I don't know why it should be so funny. People have twins quite often. But somehow I never thought we should!"

"I'm more glad about it than I can say," Jen said soberly. "I feel just this; one baby would have seemed quite natural, and Joy might not have been able to forget about Andrew just because she had one; but the shock of finding she has two, and the delight—for she will be pleased and excited—will help her to rouse up and be herself again. Even if she feels her heart is broken, for the time being, she won't die once she's seen those two helpless kids and knows they have nobody but her to look after them."

"She'll pull herself together," Rosamund agreed. "I say, won't Joan be jealous! Joy with two kids in less than a year, when she's been married for two years and has only got one!"

"It's a good thing Joan didn't have two," Jen said laughing. "To take twins out to Malta would have been rather an undertaking. Mrs. Shirley's quite excited, and Ken says his mother is so pleased; I rang him up at once. Now what are you two going to do when you've had your breakfast? I recommend bed in the little room there for an hour or two. We won't ask you to go to school this morning; people will think you're tired after last night, and will quite understand. But we are going to ask you to keep away from the house for a little while longer. It's just a case of patience now; there's no need to worry about Joy any more. But we do want to keep the house very quiet for the family. I know you'll be like mice, so you shall come home to-night; and we'll trust you not to forget, for Joy's sake. But just for to-day, you could amuse yourselves here, or somewhere, couldn't you? Would you like to go over to the Manor? I'll ask Ken if Lady Marchwood is fit, if you'd care for that."

Rosamund looked up. "I'd like to go to school, Brownie. It's always jolly to talk over a party the next morning. And may I tell the girls about Joy? Is there any harm in passing it round?"

"Not the least. But tell Miss Macey first. If you want to take the news, go to school by all means, Rose-of-the-World. Come home at lunch time, if you find you're tired."

"What about you, Primrose? You look like a rag," Rosamund said maternally. "Better have another snooze, my child."

"I'd like to go to bed," Maidlin admitted. "Are you *sure* Joy's all right, Brownie?"

"Certain sure, dear. *And* the babes!"

"Then I'll go to sleep," said Maidlin, and went to bed in earnest in the little room which had been Joy's bedroom in the old days, when she and Joan had been the Abbey Girls indeed, and Mrs. Shirley had been the caretaker, as Mrs. Watson was now.

It was the afternoon before Jen was called by the nurse to see Joy. She had seen, and nursed, the twins earlier in the day, gazing down with amused delight at the tiny sleeping faces, to her eyes exactly alike. While she held them, one woke, and yawned, and blinked; and the other immediately did the same. Then one gave a little cry, and the other at once followed suit.

Jen laughed, and gave them back to Nurse and Nelly Bell, whose services and experience had been commandeered in the emergency. "Little copy! I hope Number Two won't be just an echo of Number One. They've got the brown eyes of their mammy and their Auntie Joan; they'll be as like those two as they can be."

She knelt beside Joy's bed and kissed her gently. "Lovely little babies, 'Traveller's Joy!' So clever of you to have two! Everybody's so excited."

Joy smiled; she could well believe it. "What did Maidie say? How soon may she come?"

"Oh, very soon, if you're good. I said they were her nieces; but she said no, her sisters, because you'd been her mother. Ros wants to know if they'll be Joan and Joy?"

"I've been thinking about it. I think one must be Elizabeth, for Andrew's mother; he'd have liked it," Joy said bravely.

Her eyes met Jen's anxious ones, dark and wide with grief, but no longer with despair. "It's all right, Jenny-Wren; I won't go to pieces again. I've always feared it would happen; he could never have been happy to settle down at home. I saw that very soon after we were married. But I didn't think it would come quite so quickly. It was a terrible shock."

"Dear, how brave you are!" Jen said warmly. "Joy, Ken's going at once, to find out all he can. He knows you'll wish that."

"That's good of him," Joy said gratefully. "I hoped he would. Has it been too much for his mother?"

"She isn't at all well. But it did her good to hear about your children. Your children, 'Traveller's Joy!' Doesn't it sound swanky?" said Jen craftily, to turn her thoughts into happier channels.

Joy smiled again. "I shall call the other one for Auntie and Joan, of course; 'Margaret Joan.' Shall I add on your name after 'Elizabeth,' Jenny-Wren?"

"No, old chap," Jen said steadily. "You'll give her your own name. You know Andrew would want that; his mother's name and yours—'Elizabeth Joy.' Those are beautiful names; and we shall have Joan and Joy at the Abbey again; *nice*!"

Joy laughed wearily. "If there had been another, she'd have had to be Janet Mary."

"Another! I hope you're satisfied. Two at a time's enough. Nelly Bell's so delighted, because it means there's one for her to nurse."

"One for me and one for you," said Joy. "Or one for Ros and one for Maidie, when they're at home."

"Ros has gone off to school to publish the news. The poor kids spent all night wandering about the Abbey," said Jen, eager to fill Joy's mind with new thoughts. "Maidie says Ros took care of her beautifully, and kept making her eat things and drink hot things that she didn't want, and kept on putting more coats on her."

"How jolly decent of her! Thank Ros for me, Jenny-Wren. Maidie must have had a dreadful fright, and coming after yesterday, when she'd made that tremendous effort, it was very hard on her. I'm so sorry!" Joy said apologetically.

"It's not you who need be sorry, my dear. I'll tell you how I found the girls, when I went flying to break the news to them," and Jen described how she had found Ros and Maidie lying on the cloister steps. "Maidie's sleeping in your old Abbey room now, lying like a log. She was worn out. But when she wakes she'll want to see you, Joy; and I've promised she shall see the kids—I mean, Margaret and Elizabeth!"

Joy laughed. "I can hardly believe they're real. But it makes them more real if they have names, Jenny-Wren. They *are* nice! I don't want Nurse ever to take them away; and I'm quite jealous of Nell!"

"Oh, I guess you'll have enough of them! You'll be begging me, and Ros, and Maidie, and Nancy, to help you before you're much older. I've wired to Joan, 'Traveller's Joy.' It was fun! I loved doing it."

"What did you say?" Joy asked suspiciously.

"Oh, I just said—'Two new little Abbey Girls. Mother and children well.' I wanted to put, 'Hair as red as yours,' but it seemed a bit extravagant."

"Joan will be thrilled," Joy said pensively.

"My dear, I expect she'll come galloping home to ask what you mean by going ahead and beating her and Cicely like this. They were married a year before you were engaged; and look at you, with a large family! They'll be jealous beyond words."

Joy laughed again. "It's not as bad as it sounds. I was hardly six weeks engaged, was I?"

"If you'd let Andrew go without you, and said you'd marry him when he came home ——" Jen began.

"Oh, no, no!" Joy cried quickly. "I'm glad we didn't wait, Jen. I've had this year, anyway."

"And you've got Elizabeth and Margaret. There's Nurse looking at me; I'll have to go," said Jen, and rose. "Let me see those darling infants for another moment, Nurse; there's a dear! Aren't they perfect angels?"

Joy lay and smiled and watched her, as she held out her arms and insisted on having the twins both at once.

"Lovely children, 'Traveller's Joy!' Now go to sleep, all three of you. Maidie must be your next visitor," and Jen gave up the babies to Nelly and Nurse, and went reluctantly away.

"Do you want to see Betty and Peggy, Primrose?" Jen woke Maidlin with a kiss.

"Who? What? What did you say, Brownie?" Maidlin struggled back to consciousness.

"Your little sisters, you know. Nurse says you may see them now."

"*Oh!* Is it true, Jen? I thought I'd dreamt it."

"I think Joy feels a little like that. But the babies don't. They're quite sure they're real."

"What did you call them?" Maidlin marvelled, beginning to dress at express speed. "Has Joy chosen their names already?"

"Betty and Peggy. Joy calls them Elizabeth Joy and Margaret Joan. Margaret is for Auntie Shirley, and Elizabeth for Lady Marchwood," Jen explained. "I haven't been given leave to shorten them into Betty and Peggy, but they're such scraps that their whole names seem rather overwhelming."

"It's Joy I want to see most," said Maidlin. "But the kids will be exciting."

"You don't think Joy will let anybody else show you her daughters, do you? You may have one peep at all three of them, and one kiss each all round; and that will do for to-day. Ros hasn't come back, so you'll be long ahead of her."

"I don't know how she could go to school. I wanted to tell people too, but I was tired all over," said Maidlin, hurriedly brushing and plaiting her long hair.

"Joy—oh, Joy, darling!" and she dropped on her knees beside Joy a few minutes later.

Joy smiled at her. "Sorry to have worried you, Maidie. Look, dear! Your sisters, Madalena!"

"Why, Joy, they're pretty!" There was wondering awe in Maidlin's voice. "I thought new babies never were! But they're just like big dolls, Joy!"

"Not when they yell," Joy looked down proudly at the tiny people lying in the crook of her arm. "You'll hear plenty of them soon. Your sister Elizabeth, Maidie! Your sister Margaret!"

"I love their names," Maidlin said, with a little laugh. "But they seem rather grand for them at present, Joy."

"They'll grow up to their names," Joy promised.

"Which is which? How do you know them apart? Is there any difference?"

"She doesn't," said Jen. "She calls them Elizabeth-and-Margaret *en masse*. The first one she happens to pick up has to be Betty."

"They're not really alike," Joy said indignantly. "Elizabeth is the elder one, and she's bigger too. Can't you see the difference?"

"Not a scrap. I don't believe you know which is the elder. You're only bluffing."

"Nurse, isn't this the first one?" Joy demanded wrathfully. "There, you silly goat! I do know. This is Elizabeth, and this is my baby Margaret. And you're not to cut down their beautiful old names into silly Bettys and Peggys."

"My hat! Call them both by double names while you're at it. Come to your Auntie Jen, Elizabeth Joy! Now, Margaret Joan, sister Maidlin wants to nurse you."

“Oh, may I?” Maidie held out eager arms, and held first one child and then the other for a moment.

Joy lay and watched her and Jen in deepest satisfaction. Maidlin’s face, as she bent over the babies, was beautiful in its loving wonder.

“Let Ros come and tell me what they said at school,” Joy said, as the babies were laid beside her again.

“Mary-Dorothy! Nancy! Have you seen them?” Maidlin, in wild excitement, went rushing to find Mary and Ann.

“We looked in while you were asleep,” Mary admitted. “Aren’t they lovely babies?”

“They’ll be just like their mother,” said Ann. “Her colouring exactly. Was Sir Andrew fair, like Mr. Kenneth?”

“No, very dark. It would have been rather jolly if one kid had been like him,” Jen remarked. “They’d have been such a contrast.”

“Oh, Maidlin can supply the contrast!” Mary said laughing. “With an Italian elder sister, two bronze-red babies will be very pretty.”

“Joy said a strange thing to me,” said Ann. “She says if Sir Andrew doesn’t come back—she’s speaking of it quite freely and bravely, I’m glad to say—she’ll always feel that the second child was sent definitely to comfort her. She knows it’s unreasonable, but she says that while one baby would have seemed natural, the second one, coming when she was in such trouble, will always seem a very special gift of comfort. It’s rather a beautiful idea.”

“That’s little Margaret Joan,” Jen said. “Andrew won’t come back, you know. I’m glad she’s facing up to the idea. Ken cabled to Nairobi, and had an answer this morning—‘Rumour feared correct. Particulars later.’ He’ll go to find out, and to settle up his own affairs; but I’m afraid there’s very little hope for Andrew.”

“How glad Joy will be to have the babies!” Maidlin said pitifully.

CHAPTER XIX
CONFESSIONS

Rosamund's report of the excitement her news had caused at school amused Joy quietly. The twins were awake during "Aunty Ros's" visit, so Maidlin was hurriedly called to see their brown eyes, and to hear them cry and be convinced they were not big dolls. The girls stood and nursed them, and Joy lay and laughed, and watched their rapt faces with delight.

"Mackums was awfully upset about Andrew," Rosamund said later to Jen. "We're to let her know as soon as we have any more news. But she thought it was ripping about the twins; everybody did, and they all want to know their names. They call them Joan and Joy, junior, at present."

"Kenneth was here for a long time," and Jen told her of that day's cable. "I have to talk to Joy as soon as she's strong enough. He's been making plans, and he wants me to tell her."

"Is she awfully cut up, Brownie? She seemed all right while we talked about the kids."

"They're taking up her thoughts, and that's very good for her. But the trouble is there in the background," Jen said sadly. "We can't alter that. She'll need to be very brave presently. But I'm quite sure she will be. Just now the thing to do is to keep her from dwelling on it, and to make her think and talk about the children. The keener she gets on them, the more they'll help her when she has to begin to live without Andrew. By that time, she'll feel she has to live for them; she does feel that already. And so she won't go under. I know she'll find the courage she needs."

After grave consultation with the nurse, Jen had a talk with Joy a couple of days later, while Maidlin and Rosamund were at school. She nursed the twins for a while, praised their pretty hair and beautiful eyes, and exclaimed over their growth and wonderful intelligence. Then she surrendered them to Nurse and Nelly Bell, and slipping to her knees beside Joy said earnestly, "Dear, I have to tell you something. No, not that,"—as Joy's eyes filled with fear. "I haven't much hope of good news for you, but I know only what I've told you. We haven't kept anything from you. They're afraid the rumour is true, but it still isn't really confirmed, so you can keep a gleam of hope. No, it's this: Ken's getting ready quickly to go to find out everything, and to finish up things. He'll sell his shamba and settle down at home."

"I hoped he would," Joy admitted. "Does he mind giving up Africa? If—if there's no news, the Manor will be his, and he ought to live there. Oh, how glad I am I haven't a boy!"

Jen's blue eyes opened to their widest. " 'Traveller's Joy!' We've all been wondering if you were hiding your secret sorrow. Do you really mean it?"

"Don't you see?" Joy said vehemently. "If I'd had a boy and Andrew doesn't come back, the title and the house would have been the child's, and we'd have had to live at the Manor, because he'd have had to be brought up there, and there would have been endless fuss and bother. And Ken would have had to stay at home and help, and it would have messed things up for you and him. It's much easier and better as it is. He and you will have your home, close to us as we've always wished; and I can stay here and bring up my little girls in my own home, as I'd much prefer to do. It *is* better, Jenny-Wren. I'd far rather have it so."

"I am glad!" Jen said warmly, and kissed her again. "We've been afraid you were disappointed. The kiddies are darlings, but one of them ought to have been a boy."

"It's much better not, and I'm glad they're girls," Joy repeated. "You'll miss Ken, Brownie. I'm so sorry he has to go and leave you. You're *not* going with him, Jen Robins?" as Jen coloured suddenly.

"No, oh, no! I couldn't leave you now. And he says it's better not. Perhaps he'll take me for a trip some day. But there'll be no fun in this journey. But we have a plan, Joy; that's what I've come to tell you. We're going to be married on Saturday," Jen said, and tilted up her chin defiantly.

"Jenny-Wren! Brownie! Oh, no, you mustn't!" Joy wailed. "It does you out of all the fun of a real wedding! And I can't be there!"

"That's the one thing I'm sorry about. I don't want anybody else. I'll tell you all about it," and Jen, her confession made and her mind eased, sat down on the floor and talked. "We want to feel we belong to one another. I haven't any mother or father to want me now. I want my home and a settled feeling; and a new name and a new start will be the best way to get it. I'm going to be Mrs. Marchwood, and begin feeling old and married and settled down."

She spoke lightly, of set intention, but in spite of herself her eyes met Joy's, and an unspoken thought passed between them; that "Mrs." Marchwood would perhaps not be her name for very long.

Jen hurried on. "Neither of us could have had a big fussy wedding for a year or two, in any case. If it's true about Andrew, Ken's marriage would have had to be very quiet, at this time, as well as mine. Neither of us wants a fuss, anyway. On Saturday morning I shall put on a white frock, and come in to kiss you and the babes; then I shall walk through the Abbey and the lanes to the village, and Ken will meet me at the church. Ros and Maidie will come another way; I want to go alone. They'll be my bridesmaids; and Mary-Dorothy will come to give me away, since you can't do it. If Auntie Shirley and Lady Marchwood are feeling fit, they shall drive down to look on and see it's done properly; and I'd like to have Nancy there, because she helped me so much when I lost mother. We'll come back here to lunch, and I shall come and kiss you and the babes again, lots of times; and then Ken and I will go up to town for a few days, while he finishes his preparations. Then he'll go to Kenya, and I shall come home to you to be cheered up."

"Oh, Jenny-Wren, I am so sorry!" Joy whispered. "It isn't the right sort of wedding for you!"

"It's the sort of wedding I want," Jen said stoutly. "As to later on, of course we can't say. I may end by settling down at the Manor, and coming to call on you politely and leave cards."

Joy laughed unsteadily. "You and Ken will make a very good Lord and Lady of the Manor. Oh, Brownie, I want to see you married!"

"You can't. I won't have you," Jen said cheerfully. "I'm not going to wait till you're able to leave Elizabeth and Margaret; and I haven't invited them. No, I'm going to get it over, 'Traveller's Joy,' and don't you say any more about it."

"What does Auntie think?"

"That it will be nice for me to be married to Ken before he goes. So do I."

"Shan't you tell Cicely?" Joy pleaded. "She'll be really hurt if you don't, Jen."

Jen considered the question. "Well, for the sake of that month at Cheltenham, I will let the President know. And I thought, if you were willing, I'd give Jacky-boy the chance to run down from town for the day, 'Traveller's Joy.' After all, she was my first husband, seven years ago, when we were a married couple and adopted Della Jessop."

"I think Jack ought to give you away, not Mary," Joy said laughing.

"No, Jack and I agreed to part some time ago. It was arranged that either of us might have another husband if she could get one. She knows Ken; I took him to see her in town, and she gave her consent," Jen explained gravely. "She made us stand in front of her, and she looked up at us till she saw just how much taller he was, and then she said it was very suitable, so she stood on a chair and gave us her blessing. I think she'd like to help to marry me, though."

"I don't see how you could feel you were properly married unless Jacky-boy was there," Joy agreed.

"I shall steal the twins for five minutes for her to see. She'll come here to lunch, if you don't mind."

"Of course. You and Ken could take her back to town," Joy suggested teasingly.

"Jack will take herself back to town," Jen said haughtily. "Ken will take *me*; that will be quite enough for him. I shan't give Cicely any warning, or she'll go round and tell people. I shall write her a note the day before. Don't tell the kids, Joy; I mean Ros and Maidie, of course! We'll break it to them later. The temptation to tell the school might be too much for Ros."

"I don't believe she'd give you away. But I won't tell her. I wish you could have a jolly wedding, Brownie!" Joy sighed.

"It's the wedding I want. I haven't got a decent white hat," Jen said reflectively. "Oh, well I I'll wear my old panama and twist a white scarf round it."

Joy half sat up in bed, in her indignation; and the nurse came hurrying to remonstrate. "Jen Robins! You shan't! You shan't be married in a garden hat!—I'm all right, Nurse; I haven't got a weak heart. But I shall have, if she gives me shocks like that. Jenny-Wren, I won't have it. You shall be decent, whether it's a quiet wedding or not."

"I will be decent, old chap," Jen said soothingly. "I'll go into town and buy a new white hat, if that will satisfy you. I don't want a hat at all; but I suppose the Vicar would have fits if I appeared without one. What about a sun-bonnet? Or a morris hanky folded into a cap?"

"You'll wear my wedding veil," Joy said determinedly. "Mary will find it for you. It's put away somewhere. You'll look lovely in a veil, Brownie. To please me, Jenny-Wren! I want to see you look like a proper bride."

"But I wanted to walk through the Abbey," the bride objected. "I can't go ramping about the countryside in a floating veil, 'Traveller's Joy!' "

"I know how you feel about being married from the Abbey," Joy assented. "You and Joan were always more keen on the old place than I was. You can have your walk, Jenny-Wren, and the car can pick you up at the Abbey gate, after taking Auntie to the church; and you can put on your veil in Mrs. Watson's little room."

"Oh, well! I don't mind driving the last few steps, if it will please you. I'm not keen on a veil, but you're being done out of all the fun, so I'll give in on that point, if you like," Jen conceded, and kissed her and went away.

That night Jen sought Mary in her room at bedtime. "Mary-Dorothy, have you company asked? No? Then may I be it, for to-night?"

"Always room for you, Brownie," and Mary filled her kettle and lit the gas ring.

"I want to know how you've managed it," Jen plunged into business. "What have you done to yourself, Mary-Dorothy?"

Mary paused, tea-pot in hand, and gazed down at her. "Would you mind telling me the train of thought leading up to that explosion? It's rather sudden. I can only say—'How? What? Where? Why?' Or gaze at you in stunned bewilderment."

Jen laughed. “Sorry, old thing! I’ve thought so much about it that it seemed quite plain to me.”

“Evidently,” Mary said dryly. “I’m sorry to seem dense, but really I don’t know what it’s all about.”

“I used to lecture you, and you used to say, ‘I don’t know’—‘I don’t think.’ The other night, before the twins were born, when I got panicky, you up and lectured *me*. How did you manage it?”

“I’m sorry.” Mary stood arranging little brown cups on a gold and brown tray, and looking down at them, her colour rising. “I didn’t mean to lecture. I’m sorry if it sounded like that. You were overtired and not seeing things clearly, and four in the morning’s a horrid squirmy time. Everything seems to go. I know it so well; I quite understood.”

“I lost grip of myself, and of everything. I *was* tired,” Jen admitted. “But you didn’t, that’s the point. You were just as tired, but you kept your head, and made me see the truth of things. Once you couldn’t have done it, Mary-Dorothy; you’d have gone to pieces before I did. How was it?”

“I wasn’t so tired. At least I hadn’t been dancing. It was no wonder you collapsed, after the hard day you’d had,” Mary temporised.

“But you’d had the awful shock about Andrew. I knew it before. You’re fencing, Mary; you know I’m right. You took charge of me and talked sense to me, just as Nancy did that other time. You couldn’t have done it then. What’s changed you?”

“I haven’t——” and then Mary checked herself. “I won’t fence any more, Jenny-Wren. I didn’t know I had changed; but I—I asked that I might be. Perhaps it has happened. It’s one more answer. There have been several already.” She came and stood beside Jen at the open window.

Jen looked up at her eagerly. “Dear, do tell me, if you can. I was surprised by the way you spoke that night. You seemed—well, certain and definite; you never used to.”

Mary flushed, and laughed. “I never was. But I had nothing behind me. When my opinions were challenged, they never seemed worth while. I had no faith in them, because they were only myself.”

“And now?” Jen asked eagerly.

“And then,” said Mary vehemently, “I failed you when you needed me. It was the biggest shock I’d ever had; bigger even than when you and Joy came to our flat that night, piping tunes, and found me crying because I’d failed with Biddy. I’d have given everything I had to have been able to help you. I failed you; I didn’t know what to say. I had nothing to say. The shock of it almost made me ill. I cried when you’d gone, till I was nearly sick; it was sheer shock and heartbreak—because you’d had to turn to some one else.”

“But, my dear, when was that?” Jen asked sharply. “You never failed me. Aren’t you imagining it, Mary? Isn’t your imagination running away with you again?”

“Oh, no. It happened, but I thought you hadn’t realised it. I’m glad you didn’t, but that doesn’t make the thing itself any different. I’m very grateful that I didn’t hurt you; it’s more than I deserve. But I didn’t help; you had to turn to Nancy. When you said: ‘She’s the newest friend, but she’s helped most of all,’ I knew it was true. But it was about the biggest shock I’d ever had. I knew you didn’t know, and I was very thankful.”

Jen’s face was grave. “Mary-Dorothy, I didn’t understand. I’m sorry I said that. You mean, of course, when I heard about mother.”

"It was true," Mary said quickly. "That was why I minded so much. If you'd turned from me when I'd had something to give you, I'd have felt differently about it. I knew I had nothing to give. I didn't know how to comfort you. Nancy did; I was more than thankful she was there."

The kettle boiled over, and Mary turned away quickly to make the tea.

Jen sat on the window-seat, staring out at the moonlit lawn. "Tell me the rest, Mary-Dorothy. I know there's more," she said, as she took the cup and the biscuit Mary brought to her.

"It was such a shock that it brought me right up against myself," Mary said quietly. "I wanted to know why I'd failed; why I couldn't think, as Nancy had done. She helped me a little, but not very much; and she was right. She couldn't do my thinking for me. At last I saw that I'd always lived in dreams, and I'd always taken my opinions from other people. I depend on other people, from sheer laziness. Oh, yes! It is that," as Jen began to protest. "It's troublesome to think, and so I say I believe what other people believe. I've never thought for myself. And so, at a crisis, it all gave way beneath me, and I couldn't say *I know* or *I believe*, because I didn't know or believe anything. I only thought I did."

"But lots of us are like that," Jen objected. "Aren't you being rather hard on yourself, old thing?"

"I'd been soft too long," Mary said briefly. "I wouldn't think in earnest; I thought I couldn't, which was rubbish——"

"Utter rot," Jen agreed warmly.

"Yes. So I used to go off into dreams, to escape the need to think. It was lazy, and it was cowardly."

"But you'd stopped all that!" Jen cried indignantly. "You told us so a year ago!"

"Oh, no, I hadn't. I thought I had. I thought, when I began writing, I left the dreams behind. I know now that they only changed," Mary said definitely. "They were new dreams, healthier ones, perhaps; and I didn't recognise them as day-dreams; but they were dreams, and I lived in them. I dreamt of you and Joy, and of how I could please you; much as Maidie dreamt of Joy while Joy was abroad. I had a whole day-dream you knew nothing about, and it centred round you two, and my life spent in helping you and repaying what you'd done for me."

"How jolly nice of you!" Jen began.

"But it wasn't right," Mary said sharply. "I didn't make it real, don't you see? When you really needed me, I had no help to give. When I saw that clearly, and that it had been a dream, I wondered if I could lift myself out of the dream and make it real. And I wondered if I'd have to go on all my life fighting against dreams, one after another, and always being conquered by them.—Do you want to hear all this? Are you bored stiff?"

"I'm dying to know what you did about it!" Jen said fervently. "It's obvious you did something."

"An idea came to me; I believe it came to help me; and I hung on to it. What if the dreams weren't meant to be fought, but to be used? What if the tendency to dream, which is so strong that I can't control or conquer it, was meant to help me instead? Perhaps, instead of being a danger, it was meant for a weapon," Mary said urgently.

Jen nodded eagerly. "Go on! That's sense. You'd tried to fight it, and you couldn't. Well?"

"It had put me where I'd failed you. I was in dreadful trouble. I prayed, I think for the first time. I asked that God would take over my dreams and turn them into something real, to help

me to help others. And then—well, it seemed wrong to ask, and then do nothing more, so every single time my thoughts began to wander off, to you, to Joy, or to drift, I turned them back; I began to build a new dream, in which God worked through me, and I listened all the time for His voice. My old dreams had always come; this was the first I'd ever tried to make.'

"And was it easy?" Jen asked quietly.

"Easier and easier. After a time, my thoughts didn't need turning; they turned of themselves. Things fitted in; little things I read, words I heard in church, things said by Nancy, or even by the girls, things I'd heard or read years ago. I believe," Mary said steadily, "that I am helped, every day, all the time. I began to think things over; to go over my life, in the way I spoke of to you that night; and I have been helped all along. Things have come, over and over again, at the right moment, and in the end they've turned out for good, though they haven't always seemed so at the time. Looking back, one can see that they were good. I have been guided and helped; it couldn't be all chance. But I haven't seen it as help. There's been a Power helping and guiding my life, but I haven't recognised it. I've been in a dream. Now I'm awake, and I recognise what is happening; and I try all the time to put myself in line with that Power, which is God; to carry out His plan, to do what He wishes, to find out His way for me, and to follow it. That's all that has happened, Jenny-Wren."

"All! Yes, but it's everything," Jen said quietly. "You'll never fail any one again, you know, Mary, dear."

"I *don't* know. I only hope."

"Oh, but that isn't trusting," Jen said quickly. "You've asked, and you've tried. And you know you've been helped. Now you have to believe it will always happen."

"I know. I know all that. But ways of thought change very slowly. I'm getting used to new ideas and a new attitude by degrees. I used to think these things happened suddenly, all in a moment, and then everything was different for ever. But it would be much more true to think of it as a gradual change."

"As growing," Jen amended. "We grow slowly. I've been unrecognising too, you know. Most of us are, until something wakes us up. You've helped me to see more clearly, Mary. I'll try not to take things so much for granted. I believe you've set me thinking too."

Mary coloured. "What woke me up was my helplessness to help you. It was a terrible shock. I'd got rather satisfied, I think; I'd settled down. I'd had one book out, and people seemed to like it; and I'd written another; and I'd done Joy's job here fairly well. Everything seemed nice and comfortable. I simply wasn't troubling myself about anything; and I felt pleased with myself and didn't see that I was in any need of help. And all the while I was building on a sandbank, living on a dream-foundation. I—*I* myself, wasn't there at all; I was a shadow of other people, with an inner life of dreams that changed with every wind that blew. The shock that woke me showed me what I was like; and I wanted to be different, with every inch and every bit of me. But I couldn't really change myself; I could only ask that I might be changed."

"It has happened, you know," Jen put down her cup and rose, and stood looking down at Mary. "You've helped me, Mary-Dorothy; you are different. I shan't forget."

"I've just begun to find out what a long way I have to go," Mary confessed. "But that's better than thinking I'd got there."

Jen laughed. "Don't be so hard on yourself, old dear! You didn't think you'd got there. Perhaps you were taking a little rest on the way. That was all."

“I hadn’t started. I didn’t know I needed to start,” Mary said quietly. “I didn’t know anything, Brownie. I don’t feel I know anything now; or at least, very little.”

“Don’t you think we know a big thing when we’ve discovered that we don’t know anything?” Jen asked seriously. Then she laughed, and kissed Mary good-night. “Thank you, Mary-Dorothy, more than I can say, for trusting me and telling me all about it.”

CHAPTER XX
PLANS FOR MARY

Next morning Jen wandered into the big kitchen, after Rosamund and Maidlin had started for school.

Mary was there, consulting Ann as to a list of household goods to be ordered from town. Ann was making pastry, her sleeves rolled up and her hands busy with the dough.

Jen strolled up behind them, and put a hand on one shoulder of each. “My children, hear my news! I went to tell Mary-Dorothy last night, but we talked of other things. Don’t swoon! I’m going to be married on Saturday.”

They looked up at her with startled faces. “Brownie!” said Mary, aghast.

“It’s not really sudden,” Jen urged. “Ken and I arranged it days ago, before the twins happened.”

“You don’t mean that you’re going to Africa with him?” Ann asked quickly.

“No, my dear, I do not. Not this trip. But I’m going to be his Mrs. Marchwood before I let him go and leave me.”

“You’ll be——” Ann began, and then stopped. “Do you think it’s better, Jenny-Wren?”

“A very quiet little wedding. Yes, Nancy, I’m sure it is. I want the right to look after his mother; her heart is weak, and she wants me to adopt her. And I want to be really related to Joy and the twins. If I share their name, I shall feel we’re all one family. You’ll cook me a nice little lunch for a wedding breakfast, won’t you, Nancy?”

“You shall choose the pudding,” Ann promised enthusiastically. “Tell us more about it, Brownie!”

“I want you to come to the church, so it will have to be a cold lunch. You must come,” Jen urged. “Mary-Dorothy’s going to give me away. Won’t you, Mary? You’ll do a little thing like that for me?”

“I’ll give you to Kenneth Marchwood gladly,” Mary assented.

“Please don’t give me to anybody else! Nancy, that pastry will be heavy if you don’t get on with it,” Jen said severely, and seated herself on the table and began to butter patty-pans for little tarts. “I’ll tell you all about it, shall I?”

“Please do. It’s rather important, you know,” Mary said meekly. “It’s a good thing you happened to mention it. Four days’ notice is better than nothing, of course.”

“It’s plenty, old chap. I don’t want any fuss. Ken’s seeing to licences and things, and he’s talked to the Vicar. Don’t tell the girls yet; I’d like to tell them myself; and I don’t want it spread round the school. I shall ask them casually on Friday night whether they’d like to be my bridesmaids.”

“Poor Rosamund!” Mary said laughing. “How she’d have loved telling the other girls!”

“She can do that on Monday. I shall be in town with Ken by then,” and Jen told her plans, while Ann rolled out the pastry, and made her tarts.

“I think you’re wise,” was Ann’s comment. “I’ll arrange a menu which will allow me to get to the church. I’d like to see you married.”

“Oh, I’m depending on you to back me up,” Jen told her gravely. “I expect you and Mary-Dorothy to do the mother-in-the-background stunt; sort of experienced elder sisters, to hold my hand.”

"Not experienced this time," Mary said laughing.

"Come out in the garden with me, old chap," and Jen took Mary's arm and led her out among the gooseberry bushes.

"I've been thinking," and Mary, with sudden brave resolution, made a plunge and spoke out on a matter which had been lying heavily on her heart, "that when Joy is about again she'll want to keep herself busy, and not sit thinking, so she ought to take up all her old life and interests here. She won't need me any longer. I was to carry on while she was abroad. So I shall look out for something else. The right thing will come along, of course. I wonder what it will be?"

Jen glanced down at her quickly. There was nothing in Mary's grave face to betray the terror in her soul at the thought of a new beginning, of uprooting herself from this loved home, with all its happy friendships. But with Joy settled finally at the Hall, how could she feel herself needed?

"You're plucky, old chap," Jen said gently. "But you're an old silly too. Do you suppose we could ever let you go and help anybody else, after all you've done for us? The 'right thing' will come along, but you won't have to look for it. Shall I tell you my idea of the right thing for you?"

"Yes, please, Brownie," Mary said, very meekly.

"Sit down there, then, and listen to me!" and Jen pushed her gently down on the stone garden seat, and perched herself on the arm. "I had a topping idea the other day, but I didn't know if I'd be able to wrest you from Joy's clutches. She does depend on you so! First, tell me this. Are you willing to go on with a part-time job? Or do you want to give up all your time to writing books?"

"I couldn't afford to," Mary said quickly. "The books wouldn't keep me. And I couldn't write all day; I should get worn out. I'm more and more convinced writing is a thing to do when one's daily work is over; at least, for beginners, and I'm still a beginner. I love to think about my book during the early part of the day, and then settle down to it with an easy mind after lunch, knowing I've done a good morning's work of other kinds."

"There hasn't been much settling down to it lately, I'm afraid. Are those proofs sent off? We've been taking up too much of your time, Mary-Dorothy."

"They're nearly ready to go. We've been rather in a crisis, haven't we? I feel it helps me to keep steady and balanced, to have some routine work as well as writing," Mary said thoughtfully. "If I tried to write all day, I should get excited and worked up, and I might go off my sleep, or even off my head."

Jen laughed. "I haven't seen much sign of it coming on, my dear."

"Oh, but you don't know. You don't know what my inside self is like," Mary said seriously. "It's volcanic, and it's carefully repressed. When anything upsets it, I get frightened by the strength of feeling that's aroused. It takes me off my feet. If I lived only in a world of books, and of imagination, it might be very bad for me. No, thank you, Brownie. I prefer to have a second job to steady me, and the less exciting it is the better. I rather think washing up dishes and making beds, and doing shopping and dusting, would be even better than running Joy's clubs and things."

"You are funny, old dear!" Jen said laughing. "Of all the quiet mousey people to talk about being volcanic and repressed, you're the quietest I know!"

"Stodgy, I suppose, only you're too polite to say so," Mary retorted. "Oh, but you don't know! What's your idea of the 'right thing' for me, Jenny-Wren?"

"I think Joy will need you here. With the twins, she'll have her hands full; and she was needing a secretary even before she married; you know, Biddy once told her so! She'll never be content not to take up the responsibilities of her position and her money; and she'll probably need your help. But just suppose she didn't. Then I've a vision of my big old house on the Yorkshire moors turned into a beautiful home for tired mothers from the Sheffield slums, and over-worked shop and factory girls; and somebody like you at the head of it, and—if we could get her—Nancy to help you. Mary-Dorothy, wouldn't it be *fun*? You and Nancy working together, as matrons of a holiday home! You'd get on well with Nancy, wouldn't you?"

Mary's eyes had lit up. "It would be fun," she admitted. "I might do it, with Nancy to help me. I do love to have somebody to rely on," she sighed. "It would be much better for me not to have Nancy, you know. But I'd be sorry for your home."

Jen laughed again. "I think it would be topping for you to have Nancy. Now don't you go worrying about looking for the 'right thing'! It's right here, waiting for you. Of course, if Andrew should come back—but I'm afraid it isn't likely—you'll be needed here, and Joy and the twins will go to the Manor, and I shall beg Ken to live at The Grange. It would be absurd for him to build a house for me, when I've got that dear old place that I love. But I don't believe Andrew will come back, and I don't think Joy does either. Now I'm going to meet Ken, and he's going to take me all over the Manor. I've been before, but I shall look at it differently when I'm thinking of it as my home."

" 'Traveller's Joy,' your babies get prettier every day," said Maidlin that evening, as she and Rosamund each nursed a twin, sitting by Joy's bed. "I thought they were pretty when I saw them first, but they're ever so much nicer now."

"I hope they'll go on improving. We've a lot to learn about babies, haven't we, Primrose? How are you getting on at school? Is she a good Queen, Ros?"

"Not so bad," Rosamund's face clouded, and she bent over little Margaret Joan.

"Ros does most of it," Maidlin said honestly. "She promised to help me, and she's topping."

"Rosamunda, you mustn't do it all," Joy looked at Rosamund closely. "It isn't good for Maidie. She'll shirk and leave it all to you, if you let her. What secrets are you whispering to my younger daughter? What's the row, Rose-of-the-World? You aren't happy. Is it that trouble with Pat?"

Rosamund looked up, flushed and unhappy. "I don't feel right. And Mary says I won't, till I've made it up with Pat. But how can I, Joy? I've told you what happened. I trusted her and she cheated me. I said I'd never forgive her, and I meant it. So when she asked me to, of course I couldn't. What do you feel about it? Don't you understand?"

"Absolutely, old chap, because it happened to me when I was at school—when I was the Queen."

"Oh?" Rosamund and Maidlin turned to her quickly.

"Is it a story we haven't heard?" Maidlin pleaded. "Tell us, Joy!"

"Not much of a story. I had a quarrel with the girl I'd asked to be my Maid. She read some private notes of mine, which I'd been foolish enough to write down and careless enough to lose. I was mad, and wouldn't speak to her for a whole term and more; and everybody felt horribly bad. I was in the right, just as Ros feels in the right, so far as the actual trouble was concerned; she had no right to read my book, just as Pat had no right to take advantage of Ros's hospitality. But I'd been wrong to give her the chance to do it; and I couldn't take it as a

joke. I was wrong to feel so bitterly about it. I know what you mean when you say you don't feel right, Ros. And you won't feel right, my dear kid, so long as you keep that wrong attitude to Pat. You're out of tune; of course you feel bad."

"But how can I put things right?" Rosamund asked stormily. "I said I never would. What did you do? How can I back out?"

"Cicely and the other Queens came to my rescue, and insisted on knowing all about it. But the real opening came from Carry herself; and they urged me on to take it. I should wait, and look out for a chance, Ros. It's difficult to make a move when you've taken up such a strong line about it. Keep watching, and if any chance comes to do something nice for Pat, or to speak to her in a casual natural way, you jump at it. If you can make yourself feel sick of the present state of things and eager to end it, and if you can remember how much you were to blame yourself in the first place, you will look out for a chance and take it when it comes. You're too fair to go on putting all the blame on Pat, once you really feel it was partly your fault."

"I only meant it as a joke," Rosamund said quickly.

"So did Pat, I suppose," Joy said, more quickly still. "It's no use, Ros. So long as there's an ugly out-of-tune feeling in your life, no excuses will get rid of it."

"That's what Mary-Dorothy said," Rosamund admitted. "Change kids, Primrose! Give me Elizabeth Joy for a moment," and Joy and Maidlin knew the subject was to be changed too.

CHAPTER XXI
A VERY QUIET LITTLE WEDDING

"Where's Jen?" asked Maidlin, after late tea on Friday evening.

"Out with Kenneth," Mary tried hard to keep the thrill of excitement out of her voice.

"She's always out with Kenneth," Rosamund grumbled. "He's a nuisance. I wish people wouldn't get engaged!"

"Sometimes people go one better than that," and Jen stood in the doorway. "How would you two like to be bridesmaids to-morrow?"

"Jen Robins! *Whose?* You're not going—oh, Jen, no! Don't get married and go away?" cried Rosamund, and sprang up, incredulous and dismayed.

Jen nodded slowly. "But I'm not going away. I wouldn't trust you to take care of those twins."

"Brownie, what do you mean?" Rosamund demanded.

Maidlin, with dazed eyes, was staring at Jen. "You said *to-morrow*, Jenny-Wren! You couldn't mean that!"

Jen put her arm round her. "Primrose, you'll wear your lemon-yellow frock, and Ros shall wear her strawberry-pink linen, and we'll look like a plate of ice-cream. Mary-Dorothy's going to be my father and give me away, and there'll be nobody else there but Lady Marchwood and Auntie Shirley, and Cicely Everett and Jacky-boy, and Nancy. Oh, and Ken, of course; and the Vicar. That's all. Won't it be a dear little wedding?"

"Do you mean it, Jen Robins?" Rosamund cried.

"I do, Rose-of-the-World. Why not?"

"But why? Couldn't you wait and have a proper wedding, with a party, and—and a cake, and a dress, and crowds of people, and presents?"

"You can send the presents afterwards," Jen said calmly. "I shan't refuse them. All gifts gratefully received! I shall have a dress, a white dress; Nancy's making me a cake, and you'll be my party. I don't want crowds of people. It will be much jollier, won't it, Maidie?"

"Heaps," Maidlin said fervently. "But I don't believe it yet."

"Neither do I," Jen gave a little laugh. "But Ken seems to." And she explained the reasons for her decision.

Rosamund still looked indignant. "Well, I think it's jolly hard on the Hamlet Club, and the rest of the school, after all the years they've known you. I've a good mind to take the car and scoot round to Nesta and Muriel to-night."

"Go to Pat Mercer. She's nearest," said Jen unkindly.

Rosamund turned away, and went flying upstairs to Joy. "Joy, have you heard? Isn't Brownie mad?"

"All the same, I'm a little sorry now that I didn't tell a few more of the girls," Jen admitted to Mary and Maidlin. "They'll feel I've let them down badly, I'm afraid. It wouldn't have done any harm to let them come to the church; they'd know we couldn't do more than that. But it's too late now. I couldn't send postcards saying: 'Being married to-morrow morning,' could I?"

"The post has gone," Mary said practically. "All those you care most about will be there, Brownie."

"That's true," Jen agreed. "You and Ros must soothe the rest for me, Maidie. I hope Ros won't be too indignant with me!"

But when Rosamund came down, after a very private talk with Joy, she seemed comforted and less disturbed. "I'm glad you aren't going away with Ken, Brownie. It will be fun to have you 'Mrs. Marchwood!' And we'll get out of all the fag of new frocks and presents, for, *of course*, you won't expect wedding presents, if you have such a very quiet wedding!" she teased.

"Do just as you like about that," Jen said haughtily.

"I shall get you the loveliest present Joy can think of, Brownie," Maidlin promised.

In most respects, Jen's wedding went exactly as she had planned. She had a quiet breakfast in Joy's room, and refused to see her bridesmaids until the time of the ceremony, thereby escaping Rosamund's riotous excitement and desire to tease. Jen sat by Joy, and nursed both the sleeping twins, while Mary kept the girls at bay, till Ann had the brilliant idea of calling them to help her in the kitchen, saying she would never get to the church in time without their help.

Mary filled the house with white roses and lilac, and arranged a big bunch for Jen to carry. Nell Bell and the younger girls set the luncheon table and made the rooms look festive, and Ann cooked at express speed.

Jen slipped away to her own room for a while, and spent a few quiet moments there, when she had dressed in her white frock, thinking of her mother and father, and remembering how much they had liked Kenneth; thinking of Joy, and of what marriage had meant to her. She watched the car drive away with Mrs. Shirley and Ann; and saw Rosamund and Maidlin in their pink and yellow frocks, run across the lawn hand in hand, to take the lane paths to the village.

Then she went quickly to Joy's room, kissed her once more, and kissed the twins, and hurried away.

Her white roses were waiting for her in the hall. Mary, in a lilac frock, came down to join her, and they went together through the garden and through the Abbey, Jen's waving curls bare in the sunshine.

"The girls are saying it's the sort of wedding-day Joy had, Jenny-Wren; sunshine, and singing birds, and everything flowering and beautiful."

"Yes, it's perfect. It *is* best, in spite of everything, Mary-Dorothy," and then Jen lapsed into dreamy silence.

In the little Abbey room, she put on the veil Mary had found for her, and Mary and Mrs. Watson arranged the cap on her sunny hair, and exclaimed in delight at her sudden transformation.

"You look like a real bride now, Brownie. You must let Joy see how pretty you are," Mary said warmly.

"I tried the thing on in her room last night," the bride said ungratefully. "She seemed to think it was all right. Feels funny for me, but I suppose it's the proper thing," and she glanced hurriedly and almost shyly at herself in Mrs. Watson's little mirror. "Doesn't look like me a bit! Veils are for neat little people, who are modest and shy and retiring. Big bouncing creatures should wear hats, *I* think!"

"That's absurd, Jenny-Wren. The very first thing I noticed about you, after your happy face, was the beautiful way you moved," Mary said severely. "I haven't noticed that you've begun bouncing *yet*. You're over-excited, dear. Try to calm yourself. Here comes the car!"

"If I mayn't be a wee bit excited on the day I'm being married, when may I be excited?" Jen asked meekly, and followed her out to the car. "All the same, I do feel dressed-up. And I wanted to feel just ordinary. It's not as if there was going to be anybody there! In a half-empty church I shall look so silly!"

"There will be Jacky-boy and the President," Mary said consolingly. "What a pity you didn't ask the rest of the Queens, and the Club!"

"Sorry. But it can't be helped now. I didn't want them, at first," Jen said regretfully.

As the car reached the village green, Jen's eyes widened at sight of the cars parked around it, and the rows of bicycles against the railings. The village people had heard a rumour of what was afoot, and were gathering in crowds. That was only to be expected, but how could all the cars be accounted for?

Jen turned on Mary, with a flash of understanding. "Mary! Who has given me away? Not you? Joy? What did she do, Mary?"

"She said you'd be sorry later on, if your friends weren't there, and she was right, Jen. You'd begun to be sorry last night," Mary pointed out.

"So she made you write! Oh, well! Let's get it over! I'll talk to Lady Marchwood later!" Jen tilted up her chin defiantly, and walked past the rows of smiling village girls and women, and the excited children to whom she had taught country-dancing so often.

Instead of the select little family party Jen had planned, the church was nearly filled with old school friends. The bride saw them all, but looked at none of them, but had time to be glad, as she walked up the aisle, that she had on that very pretty white frock and veil, and that Mary and Maidlin and Rosamund, in their delicate shades of colour, would make a very dainty group behind her.

Then she took her place by Kenneth, with a smile of protest because of the unexpected guests; and the service began.

"Now the storm will burst on us!" she murmured to Ken, as they went to sign the register. "It's Joy's doing. She's broadcast the news. I didn't know till I saw the cars outside. I really did mean to have nobody here."

"The girls knew," he said laughing. "Joy seems to have told Ros last night, and she told Maidie this morning. As soon as I appeared, Rosamund informed me with great glee that *everybody* would be here!"

"Come and be mobbed. There's no getting out of it," Jen sighed amusedly, and turned to meet the crowd.

The whole Hamlet Club seemed to be there, with Miss Macey herself, and many other friends. Ann Rowney whispered a word to Mary, and they piloted Lady Marchwood and Mrs. Shirley out to the car and drove away home with them, and sent the car back for the bridesmaids and Jacky-boy and the President, who were the only guests invited to lunch.

Jen and Kenneth arrived at last, in Ken's car, after every separate Hamlet girl had kissed the bride and wished her well and called her "Mrs. Marchwood."

"Now I'm going up to talk to Joy Shirley!" Jen announced, walking in and tossing her flowers to Rosamund. "What an ordeal! I'm exhausted. I've been kissed till I'm sore!"

"You poor child!" Mary said laughing. "But weren't you glad you were a proper bride, after all?"

"Um—well, yes, perhaps!" Jen admitted. She went leaping up the staircase, and ran into Cicely Everett at the top.

"Tut, tut, Mrs. Marchwood! How undignified!" the President said in reproof.

"I'm going to shake Joy for giving me away. I think she's well enough to stand it, don't you?"

"You'll have to reckon with that nurse. She's a regular dragon," said Cicely. "I was allowed to see the twins for one minute only, and to give 'Traveller's Joy' one kiss; and then I was hustled out. Perhaps you'll be privileged to-day."

"Oh, Joy and I can manage Nursie! She's used to us by now. Aren't the twins little angels?" and Jen passed her and went in, to kneel by Joy and give her the promised kiss, to stand up and turn round and show herself, and to express herself freely on the subject of friends who gave away secrets.

"All for your good, my dear. You'd have been sorry afterwards," Joy said maternally. "You are pretty, Jenny-Wren!"

"Ken wasn't prepared for the effect of the veil," Jen said casually. "He nearly ate me up with his eyes; and he didn't listen to the Vicar a bit. I had to kick him, or he wouldn't have said 'I will.' I began to be afraid perhaps he thought he wouldn't, after all, and I'd have to insist. But he was only gazing at my—your—veil."

"I can quite believe he liked it," Joy said, and lay and gazed at her. "My sister, Jenny-Wren!"

"At last. I've told Ken that's all I'm marrying him for. He says he doesn't mind, so long as he gets me," and Jen went down, very hungry, to do justice to Ann Rowney's lunch.

"To think that Nancy came here as a stopgap, to feed us while Cook was away, and stayed to make my wedding-feast!" Jen remarked to Mary.

"She says she's frightfully bucked that she was here to do it," Rosamund said, overhearing the words.

Jacky-boy, a slim dark girl of Jen's age, who was studying medicine in town, seized her former "wife" in her arms as she came down to lunch. "Jenny-Wren, I didn't know you could look so lovely. I don't think I'll let him have you, after all."

"Too late!" Jen shook her head at her. "It was seven years ago, and seven years is equal to divorce. I'm free to marry again, Jacky-boy."

"There'll be a shower of wedding-presents soon," the bride announced to Joy, when she had changed into one of the pretty patterned handwoven frocks she loved, and had been to say good-bye to Mrs. Shirley, who was tired out and had gone to rest. "They'll simply rain in on you. You and Mary can deal with them. I don't want to hear anything about them till I come back. It will be something to do afterwards," and she kissed Joy and the twins good-bye, for a week, and ran downstairs through showers of confetti, mysteriously produced by the President and Jacky-boy, to Rosamund's delight.

Jen kissed Maidlin and Mary, waved her hand to Ann and Rosamund, and joined Kenneth in his big car. They whirled away down the beech avenue, and the guests turned to the house again to talk over the wedding.

"Absurd to think of an infant like Jenny-Wren as 'Mrs.' anything!" said the President.

"She isn't Mrs. Marchwood," said Mary Devine sadly. "Kenneth's going to tell her when he's got her alone, with all the excitement over. A cable came this morning, confirming the news about Sir Andrew. The hunting party was attacked by a handful of very wild natives, and all were killed. Their bodies have been taken to Nairobi. There's no possible mistake, and no room left for hope. Kenneth told me, just before he got the car out. He didn't want Joy or Jen to know till the wedding was over."

"Can Joy stand it?" Cicely asked anxiously. "She's had some preparation, of course. It is horribly hard on her!"

"I believe she'll stand it all right now, for the sake of the twins. But we must have the house quiet before we tell her," and Mary looked at the guests.

"Yes. We'll go. I'll take you to the station, Jack. It was good of you to let us come here at all," and Cicely turned to go, looking much distressed. "Could I help at all, Mary? It seems brutal to go off and leave Joy in such trouble. It's hard lines on you to have to tell her."

"Thank you very much for the kind thought," Mary said gratefully. "But I think she'll be all right. I'll ring you up later in the day and tell you how she is."

"Send for me if you think I can do anything. I'll come right back, if it would help at all," Cicely promised.

When she and Jack Wilmot had driven away, Ann came from the kitchen to Mary, who was hesitating in the hall, with a great dread of the task before her.

"May I come too, Mary? We'll tell her together, will we?"

"Oh, will you?" Mary turned to her eagerly. "I didn't like to ask you. It seemed cowardly. But it would be a comfort if you'd come!"

"She won't need to be told," Ann predicted. "She'll guess at once. She's expecting it."

Joy greeted them eagerly. "Come and tell me how Brownie went away!—Mary! Nancy! What's the matter? Is there news?" Her voice rang sharp with fear.

"The last news, my dear. You must be brave, as he was," and Mary put the long cablegram into her hand.

Ann slipped her arms round her. "Joy, you have so *much*! Remember, dear! Bring those babies, Nurse."

The nurse laid little Margaret Joan in Joy's outstretched empty arms. "Here's the little one, my dear. And here's your elder daughter."

"You can't ever be quite lonely, Joy," Mary whispered.

Joy clasped her children, and her tears rained down upon them. "Oh, my babies! Thank God for you!"

"You have to show them their mother can be brave, as well as their father," Ann said urgently. "They'll be as proud of your courage as of his, Joy. You'll show them you have learnt from him."

"Do you think I could? I've never been brave, Nancy. I've never needed to be. People have always been so good to me. I've been taken care of all my life," Joy whispered. "I don't know how to stand alone. I want him, Mary!"

"Dear, we know. But you've been given a new task, Joy, and it comes from the same Love that has cared for you and sheltered you till now," Mary said earnestly. "Now you're asked to pass on the love and care to these little girls who have never had a father; Andrew's little girls! To give them the care and love he would have given them; to teach them to be proud of their father's fearlessness, and to show them their mother's courage. You can do it, Joy! It's a hard thing to face, but you will do it. You had no father or mother yourself, but you know what a happy life you've had. Now you're going to give the same to your children. You'll take up your own life again bravely, for their sake."

"I'm very tired," Joy whispered. "But you have helped, Mary and Nancy. Let me be quiet now, and hold the babies, and think. Thank you both, dears, for trying to help."

At a look from Nurse, Ann and Mary crept away.

"She'll be all right now," Ann said, in relief. "I'm very glad there are *two* children, Mary-Dorothy. One, with no father, could hardly fail to be spoilt. But two will help one another."

Mary agreed thankfully, and went off to telephone to Cicely; and later rang up Kenneth and Jen, to say that all was well.

CHAPTER XXII
ROSAMUND CLEARS THE AIR

Rosamund and Maidlin, arriving at school on Monday morning after a very quiet Sunday at the saddened Hall, found wild excitement reigning everywhere over the news that had leaked out. Every girl who had been unable to get to the wedding, or, being outside the Hamlet Club, had not happened to hear of it, wanted to know if it were true that "Brownie had gone and got married all of a sudden"; what she had worn, how she had looked, if there had really been no presents, no party, and no cake.

Rosamund was doing her best to satisfy all these demands, when Barbara Honor came up.

"I say, Ros!—oh, no, I suppose you're no use. Primrose, perhaps you could help. Come over here. I want you, Maidie."

"Why am I no use?" Rosamund demanded. "What can Maidie do that I can't?"

"You could, but I suppose you won't. Maidie's the Queen. It's her job to try to put things right."

"What's the matter, Babs?" Maidlin asked anxiously.

"And what makes you say you suppose I won't?" Rosamund demanded indignantly.

Barbara gave her a straight shrewd look. "Pat Mercer is in the most awful trouble. Her father was having a holiday in Belgium, and he's been taken very ill. It's pneumonia, and her mother's been wired for. She went off last night, but they don't know if she'd get there in time. Pat's come to school because she couldn't bear to stay at home and wait. I thought perhaps Maidie could tell her about the wedding, and give her something new to think about. She's in the form-room with the Brownings and a lot of the others."

Maidlin looked anxiously at Rosamund. "Ros, you mustn't mind. If she's in trouble like that, I must go and try to talk to her."

For one moment Rosamund's lower self fought with the impulsive better-natured one which was the real Rosamund. Then with a quick decisive, "I'll go. I can do it better than you," she left Maidlin and Barbara staring after her, and raced away to the classroom.

With a startled look at one another, they were after her, and arrived as she was pushing her way through the crowd.

"I say, Pat!" Rosamund spoke out bravely and clearly. Every girl who heard turned in sharp amazement, and Pat, sitting at her desk, looked up with unbelief in her bewildered unhappy eyes.

Rosamund went straight to the point. "I'm awfully sorry to hear about your dad. It's rotten for you. But perhaps your mother will find he's better when she gets there, and you'll have a wire with good news before night. I'm sorry I was hateful in the hols. It was partly my fault in the beginning, and when you said you were sorry I hadn't any right to turn you down. I'm really awfully sorry about that. Look here, old chap! If you can pull through school to-day, suppose you come home with Maidie and me for tea. The car's coming for us, for Nancy's coming in to town to do shopping for Joy and to get her hair cut. She says her shingle's disappearing; and Joy hasn't enough baby-clothes for the twins. They're having to wear their very best Maltese nighties, and she wants some plainer ones to help them out. You wouldn't believe the amount of clothes you need for two babies. We'll have heaps of room in the car for you. We'll run round by your place and see if there's any news; if there's none, you mustn't

feel bad, for it will mean only that it's too soon. But you won't want to mess about alone at home, so you'll come on with us and have tea with Maidie and me and Nancy."

"Who's she?" interrupted Pat, her unhappy eyes beginning to look more hopeful.

"Nancy? Oh, she's our new cook," Rosamund said airily. "She's also a Press representative. She'll make an article out of you, if you like. She makes soups and puddings and articles, all out of nothing. We'll show you the twins, if we can kidnap them for five minutes; and then we'll go in the Abbey—properly!"—her cheeks flushed, but her eyes danced. "Or we'll have tennis; there are heaps of things to do. We won't let you sit and worry. Joy won't mind; she's being simply splendid. Of course, we don't want people about just now, and I shouldn't dream of asking anybody to tea, in the ordinary way. But when you're in such an awful hole, she'll be glad for you to come. It will help to pass the time till you get news. Andrew Marchwood's been killed, out in Africa, you know. And Joy knows all about it."

Then Pat realised fully the generosity of the invitation offered so readily at such a time. "I oughtn't to come, Rose. It's topping of you to suggest it, but you can't have company just now."

"Not company, I know. But Joy wouldn't mind you; I think she'll be glad," and Rosamund flushed "I say, come and talk to me quietly!" and she tucked Pat's hand under her arm and walked away with her.

"They've all been jawing me at home," she said frankly. "It will buck Joy up no end to know I've asked you to tea. And she'll be glad to feel I wasn't afraid to ask you just now. She's as plucky as she can be; I'm sure she wouldn't want any difference made. So do come, if you feel it would help. Every one at home will be glad."

"I'd love to come," Pat said warmly. "You know how we're all dying to see Joy's kids. It's topping of you to give me the chance first. I've been feeling scared about going home. It's so lonely; it's not as if I had a sister, or anybody. I—feel I want somebody to go with me, in case there's bad news."

"I'll see you through," Rosamund said instantly. "It's awful for you. I won't let you go back alone. If no news has come, you must sleep at the Hall; you can have Jen's room. Or if you want to be in your own house, for fear of news coming at night, I'll come home with you, if you'll have me, just for company. Might be better than nothing."

"You are ripping!" Pat burst out, her dread of the lonely house beginning to melt away. "But, I say, Rose, I was horrid that morning. I've been feeling worse and worse about it, but you wouldn't let me say so."

"Let's call it square and wash it out, shall we?" Rosamund said quickly. "I felt—you can't think how bad I felt. But it was my own fault for making the plan in the first place."

"Yes, but I played a horrid low trick on you. I really didn't mean to do anything but tease, Ros. I shall tell the girls all about it. They want to know badly. It's only fair to you."

"Oh, I shouldn't rake it all up now! What's the use? There's the gong," said Rosamund gladly. "Call it square, and bury it, Pat, and let them wonder. Now don't worry; remember you're coming home with us."

"It's awfully decent of you. But I shall tell the girls," said Pat, as they turned towards the hall for prayers. "I can't call it square until I've done that."

A quick word to Gertrude and Vi Browning was enough. "I say, tell everybody the whole thing. But be fair to Ros; she's been a real sport to me. Tell the girls the plan we made, and how Ros tried to call it off, because of Brownie's trouble about her mother; and how the rain

came on and she let us in to shelter; and then tell what we did. Tell it *all*, Vi, or I'll have to go round putting in what you've left out," Pat urged.

With this threat to spur them on, the two told the story honestly and with full detail, to the relief of the rest of the form. Not much was said, as the story of Joy's trouble and of Jen's wedding still absorbed the attention of the school. But Pat and Rosamund felt the new atmosphere of understanding and sympathy, in place of the distinct criticism which had been in the air since the beginning of the term, and both were more at ease.

Rosamund's plan for Pat worked out as she had hoped. The car, with Ann and a pile of parcels, called at the school gate at half-past four, and the three girls climbed in, Rosamund announcing casually, "This is Pat Mercer, Nancy. She's coming home to tea. We'll tell you all about it. Take your hat off; do you look very beautiful?"

Ann gravely removed her little hat. "I wouldn't go so far as that. But I hope I look neat."

"Beautifully tidy, Nancy," Maidlin said laughing.

"Very smart," Rosamund agreed, after a critical inspection of the smooth black head. "It was turning into a bob, wasn't it? Oh, we want to go home the other way!" and she hastily told Pat's story.

Ann's sympathy was practical. When they reached the house, she went in with Pat, who was looking white and overwrought. The maid had no news, however, and Pat's tension relaxed, and she sank limply down into her seat in the corner again.

The car sped away towards the Abbey, and Rosamund set herself to be as entertaining as she could and to rouse her friend by every means in her power.

When they reached the Hall, she left Maidlin and Ann to give Pat her tea, and went up to Joy's room to tell her story. As she had confidently expected, Joy's face fit up in frank delight.

"Rose-of-the-World, I am glad! You rose to the occasion at once, and asked the poor kid here, I hope? You couldn't leave her alone in such suspense. Oh, good for you! I am so glad! What can we do to help her to forget?"

"If you'd lend me Elizabeth Joy and Margaret Joan for five minutes, it would be better than anything," Rosamund said eagerly. "Pat will feel so awfully bucked to-morrow when she can say she's seen them."

Joy smiled. "Glad if they can be of any use! I'm sure they'd be glad, too. Take them, by all means; but don't get messing about with them among you all."

"Nurse shall bring them down. They're precious beyond words. And Mary and Nancy are there. Pat shall have just one peep. I was sure you wouldn't mind my bringing her here, Joy."

"I'm glad you did. You can always do anything of that kind, if it's going to help somebody who's in a tight place, Ros, so don't ever forget that."

"You are topping, old girl!" and Rosamund kissed Joy warmly. "If Maidie and I don't do the proper thing, everywhere and always, it will be queer, when we've had you to show us the way."

"Don't keep my children away from me too long," Joy warned her, with a wistful smile. "I'm always lonely without them."

The privilege of that friendly visit to Joy's house at such a time, and the sight of the precious babies, helped Pat greatly in her time of anxious waiting. Tennis, and the Abbey, and dinner filled up the evening, and when she was driven home at last, Rosamund went with her, carrying a case with necessaries for the night. Pat, deeply touched, had no words to express her gratitude, but she never forgot the help that had been given so readily, or the complete blotting out of the unhappy past.

As the car drew up, the maid came running out. “Oh, Miss Pat, your daddy’s better!” and she thrust a telegram into Pat’s shaking hands.

“It’s good news. It’s all right,” and Pat threw the paper to Rosamund. “ ‘Daddy better. Much more hopeful. Mother.’ Oh, Rose, it’s all right! Do you think it’s really all right now?”

“Looks like it,” Rosamund said joyously. “Congrats, old girl! Then you won’t want me. I’ll scoot home and tell Maidie.”

“Oh, do stay with me! I’d love it. Maidie has all the others. We can send a message by your man,” Pat pleaded.

“Would you like it, really?” Rosamund hesitated. “Oh, well! Just for a joke!”

And in the wildest of high spirits, they sent the car back empty, took possession of the house, and proceeded to arrange a midnight festival, to celebrate the good news.

Just a week after her wedding-day, Jen came back to the Abbey.

She went straight up to Joy’s room. Letters from Mary had told her all was well, and that Joy was facing her new future with courage for the sake of her baby girls.

Joy held out her arms. “Jenny-Wren! I’ve wanted you so badly. Has Ken gone? Oh, you poor kid! It is hard on you. But he’ll soon be home again. Brownie, and then you’ll settle down and be happy.”

“I wanted to come back to you at once, as soon as I heard, dear,” Jen whispered. “But Mary told me how brave you were. I knew you’d be good, ‘Traveller’s Joy.’ I knew you’d be splendid. Let me see the children! Aren’t they bonny? They’ve grown a lot, Joy. Aren’t you proud?”

“Very. And thankful for them every day. Tell me everything, Brownie. Are you going to live with us, or must you go to the Manor?”

“Half and half, at present, I think. Ken’s mother—mine too, now—wants me badly. I shall be with her a good deal, but I want to be here too. I’m going to live in both houses, and I know whenever I want anything it will be in the wrong house,” Jen sighed.

“You’ll have to make up your mind to that. Were you very busy in town?”

“Frightfully. But we went to see the Pixie and to apologise for not accepting her kind offer of her van for our honeymoon. We couldn’t wait till Midsummer Day, as she’d suggested. So we told her everything; of course, she knew Ken years ago, in France during the war. She sent her very best love to you, and hopes to see the twins some day. How are things here?”

“All very nice. Cook isn’t coming back, so Nancy’s promised to stay for a while. She says she’ll never want to go away, but I don’t know if we ought to let her go on feeding us for ever.”

“What will her Editor say?”

“She says she’ll find another.”

“No, that isn’t quite right. But perhaps I’ll find a better job for Nancy.”

“I know,” Joy agreed. “She’d do it beautifully. There is one bit of news, Brownie. Pat Mercer has been in trouble; her father’s been dangerously ill abroad. And Rosamund forgave her on the spot, as soon as she heard about it, and has been cheering Pat up all week, and looking after her like a mother.”

“Oh, cheers! I am glad! How jolly decent of Ros! She’ll be so much happier herself,” Jen said warmly.

“She’s her own old self again. Now you’d better go and look at your presents, Brownie. There are hundreds of them. You’ll have to spend a month writing letters. Give me my babies.

Kiss them, Aunty Jen."

"I'll kiss them once each. But I'll kiss my sister Joy twice," said Jen, and kissed her on both cheeks.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Abbey Girls Win Through* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]