

**THE GIRLS OF THE
ABBEY SCHOOL
ELSIE J. OXENHAM**



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The rosary flashed in the torchlight.

THE GIRLS OF THE ABBEY SCHOOL

by
ELSIE J. OXENHAM

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reprint of the 1937 WM. Collins
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TO THOSE MEMBERS OF THE
ENGLISH FOLK DANCE SOCIETY
FROM WHOM I HAVE RECEIVED SO MUCH
HELPFUL ENJOYMENT THIS STORY
IS DEDICATED IN GRATEFUL
ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF ALL
THEIR KINDNESS

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CHAPTER I

CHUMS FOR A WEEK

The crowning of the May Queen was in progress in the big school hall, and among the crowd of girls who hung over the balcony railing none was more interested than Jen. She was very much of a new girl—or else, as she said to herself, she would jolly well have been down there among the other dancing girls, who, in two long lines, were laughing at their partners as they kicked and clapped hands and shook their fingers at one another in a quaint country dance, ‘Sweet Kate.’

The four previous Queens sat on the platform, grouped about the heroine of the day, a sweet-faced, bronze-haired girl of sixteen. Jen gazed at her worshipfully. She had not been shy the day before, her first day at school, because she did not know the meaning of the word, but she had certainly felt strange. The school was so very big; there were such crowds of girls, who all knew one another, and all knew where to go. Then this girl, with the ruddy hair and friendly brown eyes, had espied her and come to the rescue, had shown her over the school and answered her eager questions.

Jen had marvelled that a senior should take so much trouble over a thirteen-year-old, but Nesta and Kathy, of her form, had explained, when, thanks to this introduction, they had accepted her into their midst, ‘She’s the new Queen. The Coronation’s to-morrow night. It’s part of her work to look after new girls.’

‘Then she does it jolly well. What’s her name?’

‘Joan Shirley. Oh, yes, she’ll make a ripping Queen!’ Molly Gilks assented.

So Jen watched Queen Joan with grateful eyes, as she walked bareheaded between the lines of cheering girls to her throne, where the earlier Queens stood waiting to greet her. At first, indeed, she had thought the bronze-haired girl who led the procession of former Queens, and wore a train of bright apple-green, was Joan; but as she watched, wide-eyed, she saw this girl rising to abdicate her place as Queen, to receive a crown of forget-me-nots in place of her faded wreath, and to lead in her successor and crown her with a wreath of starry narcissus. ‘Why, there are *two* of them!’ she said aloud, in amazement.

Somebody leaning over the railing beside her chuckled. ‘Yes, isn’t it weird? We hoped people who didn’t know them would think they were seeing double. I wanted to be down there in the crowd, and hear what people said. But you’ll do instead, as you’re new. You are new, aren’t you?’

Jen laughed as she turned to the speaker. ‘Awfully, hideously new. I’m only two days old.’

‘Oh, well, you’ll soon grow up,’ her new friend said encouragingly. ‘What Form are you?’

‘III. A.’

‘I’m III. B; that’s why I haven’t seen you, I suppose. But let’s watch the crowning; we can talk while they’re dancing.’

‘But why are there two of them?’ Jen murmured, as the one red-haired girl crowned the other, whose train was of rich violet, kissed her warmly, and left her to stand bowing to the cheering crowd. ‘Twins, aren’t they?’

‘Not exactly; they’re cousins. Joy was last year’s Queen.’

‘Joy and Joan? How muddling! They might have called one of them Alice, or Thomasina, or Muriel.’

The other girl laughed. 'Now they're going to have the Maypole! Which of the clubs shall you join?'

'I don't know yet,' Jen said cautiously. 'There are such heaps of them; I've been looking at the notices. Why aren't you dancing? And what's your name? I'm Jen Robins.'

'Jen? Not Jenny?'

'No, never Jenny!' Jen laughed. 'The boys say Jen's quite enough for me! I'm the youngest, you see.'

Her new friend nodded, apparently understanding. Then she laughed too. 'I'm Jack! I think we'd better chum. My friend left last term. I'm friends with Nesta Green, and Molly Gilks, and Kath Parker, too, but they're chums all together. You can chum with me, if you like.'

Jen's eyes brightened. 'That's topping of you! But—Jack and Jen! We really can't help it, can we? I'd like to awfully. What's the whole of you?'

'Jacqueline, of course. Isn't it enough to blight my career?'

'Not if you put tucks in it,' Jen retorted.

Jack giggled. She was short and dark, quick in her movements, with black bobbed hair tickling her cheeks and neck.

Jen was taller, but slim, with two thick, fair plaits, and stray twists of curls about her eyes and ears. 'Why aren't you dancing?' she repeated. 'I'd love to join in! Isn't this pretty?' as the plaiting of the Maypole gave place to 'Sellenger's Round,' danced in a big ring around the pole.

'Because I'm not a Hamlet. The Hamlet Club goes in for rambles and learns folk-dancing, and crowns the Queen. They have topping meetings, mostly out in the country or in a gorgeous old barn; but, you see, I go in for cricket, and they won't let juniors do both. They say you can't do either properly. Seniors sometimes do both, but not new girls. Kath and Molly play cricket, but Nesta's a Hamlet. She's dancing down there with Molly's sister Peg.'

'I'll want to do both! I can feel it coming on!' Jen sighed. 'Oh, what are they going to do now?' as the dancers scattered, and began slipping rings of bells below their knees and snatching up white handkerchiefs.

'A morris. Those others were country dances. You'll like this!'

Jen did like it, and watched with fascinated eyes as the 'sides' of six danced 'Trunkles' and 'Blue-Eyed Stranger,' then changed their handkerchiefs for staves and gave 'Bean-setting.' 'I'm keen on cricket, and I'd like to join the same as you!' she sighed. 'But it's going to be awfully hard to choose! This is so new and queer! I've played cricket all my life, but I never saw anything like this before. I'd love to join in those dances! And I'd like to join the club, because that ripping girl's the Queen.'

'We ought to belong to the same things, if we chum,' Jack said doubtfully. 'But perhaps we could—where do you live, by the way?'

'Here. My home's in Yorkshire.'

'Oh! You're one of the Special Twenty? Miss Macey only takes twenty boarders.'

'I'm the twenty-first,' Jen laughed. 'Oh, just look at this one!' as the dancers, discarding their bells, formed in sets of four for 'Heartsease,' and fell back from their opposites and turned their partners, all in the graceful, slow running step.

'That's awfully pretty!' Jack decided. 'Now it's a minuet. How d'you like being a boarder? I should loathe it!'

‘I think it won’t be bad when I’ve got used to it. It felt queer last night, of course,’ Jen said casually.

Jack gave her a quick look. ‘She’s sporty! Wonder if she cried in bed? I guess I should. Miss Macey’s quite jolly,’ she said aloud.

‘Yes, I should think she’s a sporty old bean,’ Jen agreed warmly.

Jack smothered a laugh. ‘*Jen!*’

Jen looked at her with would-be innocent eyes. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Don’t you know you mustn’t call Miss Macey a “sporty old bean?” Is that how you talk at home?’

‘When I’m with the boys,’ Jen explained simply. ‘I don’t *think* I’d say it to her!’

‘To Miss Macey? I hope to goodness you wouldn’t!’

‘Well, she looks a jolly old sport; that’s better, isn’t it?’

Jack looked doubtful. ‘Not so frightfully much. You’ll jolly well have to be awfully careful, if that’s how you talk at home!’

‘I’ve an aunt living in the town here, so I’m going to her for week-ends now and then,’ Jen added. ‘I’m to go to-night, as this is my first Friday, and stay till Monday.’

‘Meet me at the gate at ten past nine, then, and we’ll come in together. We must see one another sometimes, if we’re to be chums.’

‘Don’t you think it’s rather sudden?’ Jen asked solemnly. ‘We’d never spoken to one another ten minutes ago.’

‘Oh, but I can tell if I’m going to like people! Can’t you?’

Jen’s eyes were dancing as she answered cautiously, ‘Don’t you think we’d better try it first for a week? Like being engaged before getting married, you know? I don’t like changing once I’ve made friends.’

Jack laughed. ‘Are you Scotch? I thought you said Yorkshire? All right! We’ll be engaged for a week. Then if we still want to we’ll get married.’

‘Oh, why are they taking off their bonnets?’ Jen had been intent on the dancers all through the conversation, and had watched the ‘Ribbon Dance’ and the ‘Butterfly’ with delight in their changing movements. Now about half of the girls had tossed aside the white caps or bonnets they wore with their many-coloured dancing-frocks, and stood in two long lines, bareheaded girls facing girls still with covered hair. Jen looked at Jack for an explanation. ‘Why is it? You seem to know all about it!’

‘Edna Gilks sat next to me at the last dancing-evening, and I asked her things; she’d hurt her foot, so she couldn’t dance. That’s Edna, the “bridesmaid”—Maid of Honour, I mean—to the pink Queen, Marguerite. This is a boy-and-girl dance; the girls without caps are the men. They say it’s the easiest way to show the difference. If their hair’s covered they’re women. Nesta’s being a man, you see.’

‘Why don’t you say gentlemen and ladies?’ Jen remonstrated.

‘They never do; it’s country dancing, you know.’

‘Oh! But weren’t they men and women before?’

‘Yes, but in some dances it doesn’t matter so much. They say in others you must show the difference, or it’s no fun for the audience. I’ve seen this before; it’s called “Halfe Hannikin.” See! The men are all dancing up their own side and down the women’s.’

‘And each one has to stand and take a rest at the top, and then come in again as a woman. How weird! They’re getting all mixed up!’

‘They’ll do “Peascods” next,’ Jack prophesied. ‘The men and women make separate rings inside the big ring, and clap in the centre at different times. Edna says they’re supposed to be worshipping the old sacred tree on the village green.’

‘I’ll have to join this!’ Jen sighed wistfully, as the big rings of ‘Peascods’ swung joyfully round. ‘It’s just too awfully fascinating for words!’

‘But think of the cricket!’ urged Jack.

CHAPTER II A DISASTER

Punctually at ten minutes past nine, Jack and Jen met outside the big school gates on Monday morning.

'Been dreaming of cricket all Sunday?' Jack asked anxiously.

'No, country-dances!' Jen retorted. 'I've got little bits of all the tunes mixed up in my head, in an awful jumble! I say! There's the Queen at the gate! I'm going to ask her if I can't do both!'

'You can't; not till you're a senior, anyway. She's looking for somebody. Muriel, perhaps; she's her bridesmaid.'

Queen Joan came to meet them. Her face was unusually grave, and Jack murmured nervously, 'I wonder what's up?'

'Miss Macey wants all the girls to go straight to the hall and wait for her there. She has something to say to the whole school. Don't go to take your hats off!' as Jack, looking bewildered, turned towards the dressing-room. 'She said go straight to the hall.'

'But what on earth's up, Joan? Don't *you* know what's the matter?' and Muriel, an older girl, came hurrying up. 'Joy has just told me, but she says she doesn't know what it means.'

'I don't know a word more than you do. Miss Bates was on duty here when we came, and she told Joy and me to send all the girls straight to the hall. I'm afraid there's something wrong.'

'Shan't I go up to my room with my night things?' Jen looked up doubtfully at the Queen. 'I've been staying with my aunt for the week-end.'

Joan looked down at her, and smiled—'You're the new little boarder, aren't you? I'm glad you've an aunt living here. Are you making friends?'

'Oh, yes! And I want to learn your dances. But can't I play cricket, too? They say I can't.'

Joan laughed. 'We'll discuss that later. I think you'd better go into the hall with the rest. Miss Macey was very particular about it. We don't know the reason, you see, and when you don't know it's better to be on the safe side.'

'But I've got my nightdress here! And my brush and comb and toothbrush!' Jen remonstrated. 'Oughtn't I to put them away, don't you think?'

Joan laughed out. 'It won't hurt you to hold on to them for a few minutes longer. I'm sure that little case isn't very heavy. Better wait till we've asked somebody who understands.' She had her own shrewd idea as to the probable cause of Miss Macey's order, and knew the need to run no risks; but it was only a guess and she could not speak of it.

So Jen, lugging her attaché case, and Jack, with her strap of books and music case, joined the crowd of excited, questioning girls in the big hall, where, as a rule, hats and boots were strictly forbidden, and all waited in tense curiosity for Miss Macey's appearance. No boarders were present, a fact which was soon noted, with much surprised comment. 'What *have* they all been doing during the week-end?' Jack murmured. Joan Shirley's troubled look grew as she found her suspicions confirmed.

When Miss Macey stepped on to the platform a breathless silence fell, which made no sounding of the bell necessary. She looked worried and tired, and her explanation was short, but clear to the youngest present.

‘Girls, I grieve to tell you that we have had a case of serious illness in the house. There has not been time to write to your parents, or I would not have allowed you to come here this morning. Cissie Raynes, of Form IV. B’—Cissie’s classmates looked at one another, nervously sympathetic—‘was poorly all yesterday, and by night the doctor suspected it to be a case of diphtheria. I regret to say that is confirmed this morning, and she has been removed to the hospital, where she will have every care. The rest of the boarders will have to remain in quarantine for a few days, till we see if there are any more cases. As you have only been at school a few days, it is possible Cissie brought the infection with her, though she says she knows of no other cases near her home. But as diphtheria develops very quickly, it is quite possible she may have taken it here, and what has affected her may affect others also. I always have our drains, water, milk, etc., carefully tested each holidays, but this Easter I have been abroad, and I fear that those to whom I trusted the oversight of this duty may have failed me. I shall, of course, have these tests made again at once, and endeavour to find out where the danger lies; and the result, and the date of our resuming classes, and the place, will be communicated to your parents at the earliest possible moment. I say “the place,” because if we find trouble in this building, with drains, for instance, it may be possible to get the use of some other house and continue at least some of your classes during the summer. I am deeply distressed that this should have happened in matric term, and for the sake both of the senior and junior exam girls we will continue our classes with the least possible delay, if arrangements can be made. But on that point I shall have to write to your parents. You will go home at once now, without, of course, seeing any of the boarders or wandering over the school. Go out quietly and quickly, and convey to your parents my deepest regret that this should have happened. I am glad to be able to assure you that Cissie’s case is a slight one. The doctor gave her an injection of anti-toxin at once, and does not think she will be in any danger now, with ordinary care.’

‘Please, Miss Macey!’ Joy Shirley stepped forward. Joan had whispered a word, at which Joy’s face had lit up in delight. ‘Topping! Joan, you’re the limit for ideas!’

Jen heard Joan’s whispered answer. ‘Well, it’s the best plan, but it must come from you. I can’t offer it!’

‘Please, Miss Macey, if you do have to look for another house, would you care to come to us, or would it be too far away? There’s heaps of room at the Hall, and we don’t use more than a corner of it, really and truly. You and the boarders could easily fit in, and the sitting-rooms are quite big enough for classes. Aunty and I would be delighted.’

‘What a gorgeous idea!’ The anxious faces of the girls began to lighten. ‘That topping old house! It’s a *huge* place!’

‘Joy, dear, that is most kind, and I appreciate very deeply the readiness of the offer,’ Miss Macey said quickly.

‘Oh, it was Joan’s idea!’ Joy laughed. ‘All my ideas come from her. Every one of them’s second-hand! But as it’s my house she said I must offer it.’

‘I quite understand that it is your house,’ Miss Macey smiled, her tired face a trifle less worried. ‘But all the same, your aunt, as your guardian, would have to be consulted, and she might not welcome such an invasion.’

‘Oh, aunty’s a dear! Isn’t she, Joan?’

‘Of course!’ Joan laughed.

‘If Joan and I wanted it, she’d agree. Besides, she’d see it was good for the school, and she wants us to go in for those wret—I mean, those *important* exams!’ There was a ripple of

laughter, for the ex-Queen's feelings towards junior matric were well known. 'Really, Miss Macey, it wouldn't hurt the house; I'm sure the girls would be careful. And it wouldn't put us out at all; you see, several of the old servants have left, because my grandfather left them pensions to live on; and we haven't got settled with new ones yet. We're still sort of camping out in a corner of the Hall. You could use it for a while, and not interfere with us at all. It wouldn't be for very long, would it? Not more than this term?'

'Oh, no! Certainly not more than this term! Even if our drains were condemned, everything could be put right before September.'

'Then I think you should decide to come, and not look for another house,' Joy said eagerly.

'It is most kind of you, Joy, and a very clever thought of Joan's,' with a smile at the elder cousin.

Joan said quickly, 'I'm sure mother would be pleased, Miss Macey. We'll talk it over as soon as we get home, and write to you about it, shall we? We really aren't using more than a corner of the house at present, and the only possible objection would be if any damage was likely to be done. I'm quite sure there wouldn't be any; the girls would all be very careful.'

'I am sure they would. But do you really think Mrs Shirley——'

'Explain it all to me!' Jen pinched Jack's arm. 'I feel *fearfully* new! Everybody else knows all about it! Where does she want us to go? Where do they live? Why does the old Queen say it's her house? Isn't it her father's? And is her aunt the same as Joan's mother? Then why isn't the house Joan's? You said she was older!'

Jack laughed. 'Six shots a penny! How many more questions? But I'll tell you quickly enough. Sir Antony Abinger was Joy's grandfather, and he died last October. He left her the Hall, because her mother ran away from home and got married to Joan's uncle; he and her father were twins and awfully alike, and that's why the girls are so much alike too. Joan was no relation to Sir Antony, of course; so he had to leave everything to Joy; but they'd always lived together, because Joy's father and mother have always been dead—well, for a good long time, anyway!—and Mrs Shirley, Joan's mother, brought the girls up together. Joan hasn't any father either now. So Mrs Shirley is Joy's guardian; but the house and money really belong to Joy. All except the abbey; it's a lovely old ruin in a corner of the grounds, and he left that to Joan, because she loved it so, every stone of it, and knew every date and every story about it. He loved it too, but Joy didn't care half so much; so when he died he left the abbey to Joan, on condition she took proper care of it. Joy says he really liked Joan best. Wouldn't it be simply topping to go there every day for classes?'

'It would be gorgeous to live there! It was awfully sporty of them to ask us. How far away is it?'

'Oh, right away out in the country, miles from everywhere! We'd have to cycle every day. I wonder if they'd let me?' and Jack's face fell. 'Perhaps the train would help. I say, Miss Macey's done talking to the Queens, and everybody's going. Come on, let's scoot! Fancy going back to holidays after just two days of school! Isn't it simply topping? I wonder what mother will say?'

'But where am I to scoot to?' Jen stood in dismay. 'I'm supposed to be living here! Have I got to go and be in quarry-something with the other boarders?'

'Oh, I say!' Jack stared at her blankly. 'What *will* you do? I never thought of that!'

Jen laughed, with a brave attempt to hide her dismay. 'When is a boarder not a boarder? When she's been away for the week-end! Well, there's no help for it, I suppose! Shan't see

you for a few days, old thing! Hope I don't go and catch it! Won't it be rotten luck if I do? Here goes to join the other dip-ites!' and she turned towards the staircase.

CHAPTER III

THE ABBEY AND THE HALL

‘Look at that silly kid!’ Joy Shirley’s voice rang out in horrified dismay.

Joan lost no time in words; she merely acted. Darting across the hall she caught Jen by the arm. ‘You naughty child! Where are you going? Didn’t you hear what Miss Macey said about going straight home at once?’

Jen stared at her blankly. ‘But I can’t!’ she expostulated. ‘This is home for me just now! Where do you want me to go?’ Her indignation rose. ‘I must live somewhere, dip. or no dip., and I’m supposed to be living here! I can’t stop out in the street.’

Joan’s face relaxed, and she laughed. ‘I beg your pardon, kiddy; I forgot you were a boarder. Yes, that’s jolly awkward.’

Jen’s heart warmed to her at this frank apology. ‘I don’t a bit want to go and catch anything. But is there anything else I can do?’

‘Couldn’t you go back to the aunt you’ve been spending Sunday with?’

‘She’s gone away for a fortnight; I went with her to the station before coming to school. And I don’t know anybody else in the town.’ Jen looked anxious and downcast.

‘Perhaps one of the girls—well, why not us, for that matter? I expect we’ve more room than most,’ Joan began.

It sounded incoherent, but was plain enough to Jen. ‘Oh, would you? You couldn’t be so kind!’ she gasped, and looked breathlessly from Joan to Joy, as the cousins held a hurried consultation.

‘Room!’ Joy laughed. ‘Room for that scrap? How much room does she want? I mean how many rooms? We can spare her a dozen and never miss them! We’d better take her right along back with us now, Joan. Aunt won’t mind.’

‘No, but I’d rather have given her warning. Still, she won’t mind; she’ll be pleased. It’s only that I feel it’s hardly fair to take her by surprise. But I guess it’s our job, Joy, or what’s the good of being Queens? We can’t let the kiddy go into the way of infection, and she must stay somewhere. It’s up to us, any way you look at it.’

‘But, I say!’ Jen had been thinking quickly, and now spoke up bravely. ‘Suppose Cissie didn’t bring it from home? Suppose she got it here?’

‘Well?’ Joy asked, impatient to be gone.

Joan understood. ‘You mean you might have taken it when she did, and go and begin it at our house?’

Jen nodded. ‘That would be *awful!* I’d better stop here. Perhaps I’ve got it now, but it hasn’t begun coming out yet.’

Joy’s laugh rang out. ‘You don’t look very bad!’

Joan saw further, however, and knew that it had cost Jen an effort to be honest and speak out her sudden thought. ‘I don’t think you’ve got anything very serious yet,’ she said gravely. ‘Don’t you see, kiddy, it’s the same for all of us? We were all here till Friday evening. If it’s drains, it may affect any of us quite as much as you.’

‘Oh!’ Jen’s face lit up. ‘Do you really think so? Oh, I’m awfully glad!’

‘Wait here while I explain to Miss Macey. She’s forgotten all about you in the worry of all this,’ and Joan sped away to find the head mistress, while Jen said hurried farewells to the

envious Jack.

'It's all right!' Joan was back in a moment. 'She's awfully relieved, Joy, and we're to thank mother very much. Now, kiddy, you've got all you need for a night or two in that case, haven't you?'

'Just my week-end things, and one extra blouse. I haven't lots of clothes to change,' Jen said dubiously.

Joy laughed. 'I guess you haven't, in that wee thing! Oh, don't worry! We don't dress for dinner unless we've a big house party!'

'Joy! you've never dressed for dinner in your life. In fact'—to Jen—'we have dinner at one o'clock, except when we're at school all day. Don't try to scare her, Joy; you're only teasing. You won't want much, and Miss Macey can send you more,' Joan said comfortingly to the anxious Jen. 'Dip. isn't carried in clothes. Come along! What's your name, by the way? You did tell me, but I'm afraid in all the excitement of last Friday I forgot it again,' she laughed, as they wheeled out their cycles.

'Jen. I'm sorry it's so like yours,' Jen said demurely. 'At least, I'm glad, really; but it makes it awkward just now, doesn't it?'

Joan laughed. 'We'll try not to get tangled. Joan—Joy—Jen! It is rather bad, isn't it?'

'And I'm friends with some one called Jack,' Jen laughed.

'Jacqueline Wilmot? Yes, I saw you with her. Oh, then you're all right. I'm glad; she's quite a jolly kid. I guess you'd rather have gone home with her, but she'd have had to ask her mother first, you know.'

'No, I wouldn't,' Jen said swiftly, and coloured as she realised the impossibility of explaining in words that not even the thought of going home with a chum could be as fascinating as this invitation from a senior to whom she had already begun to look up, not only as Queen, but for her own sake. One could not quite put that into words, however.

'Hop on to my step!' said Joy. 'I'm glad I've got a step; it's awfully useful for giving rides to kids. I've carried dozens; half the lower school, I guess! Joan will carry your case. Now we're all right!'

Jen felt they were very much all right, as they spun down the high street and along the road to the hills. It was the most exciting Monday morning she had ever known. She was very sorry for Cissie, of course, and glad her case was a slight one; and she sympathised with Miss Macey, who was no doubt feeling very much annoyed—which was stating the case very mildly. But to go home on a visit to a big interesting country house, with the girls she had been admiring from a distance for some days, was very much better than sitting over algebra and analysis and geography! Jen felt her school life was beginning very pleasantly, and had no fault to find with circumstances at the moment.

'Now you get off and walk!' Joy commanded, when the road began to climb the hills, and they all walked and pushed the cycles till a level mile at the top allowed them to spin along the Ridge.

'Oh!' cried Jen suddenly, as the end of a line of fir-trees showed them the country beyond.

The elder girls laughed. 'It is sudden, isn't it? We're on the very edge of the Chilterns, and that's all Oxfordshire lying spread below us,' Joan explained, as they looked out over a wide stretch of hazy blue country, eight hundred feet below.

'And how do we get down? It stops so suddenly! Or do you live up here?' Jen asked eagerly.

‘No, we go down. There are paths and steps through the woods, but with bikes we take the winding road. You can see our village. Those trees hide the abbey and the Hall.’

‘Oh!’ said Jen again, when they had entered by big iron gates, and the great house at the end of the drive came into sight. She looked at Joy. ‘What a lot of things you’ve got!’ she said, without a tinge of envy, but in frank admiration.

Joy laughed. ‘Have I? Such as——?’

‘It’s all yours, isn’t it? All the miles of gardens, and this gorgeous house? And then being Queen—and the girls say you’re a musical genius—and you’re pretty——’

Joy gave a ringing laugh. ‘Do they? It’s very nice of them! But I’m not so sure about the genius part of it! That’s only because I make up tinkly tunes to please them. I used to think they were good, but now I’m finding out just how bad they are, and how good they ought to be. As for the rest, Joan’s got them all too, only the abbey instead of the Hall, and she’d far rather have the abbey! She’s cracked about the old thing! And she’s got something more; she’s got brains! I never pretend to have brains!’

‘You silly kid!’ Joan said brusquely.

‘True, all the same, Lady Queen! You supply the ideas for this family! Wait till you pass matric next month!’

‘Matric’s off, unless the school can carry on somehow. I’ll be awfully sorry if we have to miss the exams! I wonder if Miss Macey will come here if mother asks her?’

Joy made a face. ‘Bother the exams! I’m supposed to be going to try to take junior,’ she explained to Jen. ‘Joan’s taking real matric, and yet she’s only a month older than I am. But she’s two years ahead of me, and I shall never catch her up. I slacked for a year when we came into the country, and spent days and weeks exploring; that’s why they call me Traveller’s Joy, or the Wild Cat that walked by his Wild Lone. Joan had to be at home, because of the abbey, you know, so she swotted, and now you can see the result.’

‘Because of the abbey?’ Jen ventured. ‘But why? I don’t quite see——’

They both looked at her quickly; then Joy, looking across at Joan, made a queer face. Joan laughed. ‘I’ll show you the abbey—*my* abbey—this afternoon, and tell you all about it. But come in, and let’s explain you to mother.’

‘Aunty! Aunty, dear!’ Joy left her cycle and rushed into the big square hall to meet the little lady in black, who came hurrying out to know the meaning of their early return. ‘The school’s got dip., so Miss Macey sent us home, and we’ve asked them all to come here for classes, so that we won’t have to miss the exams, and there won’t be more than twenty boarders, and Miss Macey and the mistresses, and they’ll bring some of the maids, I guess, so that will be all right, won’t it? Oh, and we’ve brought the first instalment along with us, because we couldn’t let her go and catch it, but there’s not very much of her. We knew you wouldn’t mind, and there’s heaps of room. And can we have lunch early? For we’ve cycled there and back, and we’re hopelessly starving, all of us!’

‘That’s what Joy calls breaking it gently!’ Joan laughed to Jen, who was hanging back with a touch of shyness, but laughing at Joy’s torrent of words. ‘I knew she’d do it, but I knew, too, that I couldn’t hope to get in first! That’s the way she dashed at mother to tell her she’d been chosen Queen. Mother will need me to explain.’

‘Joan, dear, what is it all about?’ Mrs Shirley was asking quietly. ‘What has happened?’

Joy collapsed on a wide window-seat, and laughed. ‘Squashed, as usual! Now, Joan, you tell her nicely!’

The big square entrance hall was wide and roomy, with long high windows filled with coloured glass, the walls hung with old oil paintings, chiefly portraits of famous Court beauties of the days of Charles II., with here and there some of Joy's ancestors among them. 'These'—and Joy pointed to the ladies with a comprehensive sweep of her arm, later on when she was showing Jen over the house—'are a very famous collection of old portraits, nearly all by Lely. I think some of them are hideous, but they're supposed to be very beautiful. You can see they think they are! Some of them were awful rotters, but if they were beautiful that didn't matter a scrap.'

When Mrs Shirley understood the situation, her welcome to Jen was very hearty. 'The girls were quite right to bring you here, dear. I am glad they thought of it. It would never have done to leave you there. I am sure we can make you comfortable here.'

Joan had a different description of the big hall to give. As they sat on a window-seat in the sunshine, after lunch, and Joy talked of Lely's Court beauties and her own forefathers, and showed the beautiful piano which was her own especial treasure, Joan said gravely, 'I always remember that first afternoon we came here, Joy. It's not a year ago yet; it was in June, you know.'

Joy sobered. 'To dance; yes, I remember. And didn't he enjoy it!'

'It was while Joy's grandfather was alive,' Joan explained. 'He was very old and ill and lonely, and wouldn't have anybody here but servants. But one day he went into the abbey, where we were living, and saw us dancing a minuet on the cloister garth—that's the green lawn in the middle of the monastery, where the monks and abbots used to be buried.' Joy laughed. 'We had no right to be dancing there, of course, and we weren't dressed for it, either; I had been dusting, and Joy was doing her homework, and we had on old green and blue pinafores! But it was sunny, and the garth looked so smooth and newly rolled and cut, that we ran out there to practise our minuet. He watched us, and later on asked mother to send us up here to dance it to him. So we asked Miss Lane to come and play for us, and, of course, we wore our dancing frocks; Joy's is bright green, and mine is gray; and he sat huddled up in a chair just *there*, and we danced to him! It felt awfully queer, but he seemed to like it, for he asked for something else. We were only just beginning dancing, but we managed 'Princess Royal,' that lovely morris jig that they danced last Friday night.'

'For two? With bells and handkerchiefs? And high jumps in the middle?' Jen asked eagerly.

'Capers—yes!' Joan laughed. 'He liked that, and asked to see it again. Then we sat and told him all about the club, and school, and about Joy being Queen, and he came to watch the next dance evening.'

'And just loved it,' Joy added. 'It was his last night.'

'He was taken ill that night, and died two days later,' Joan said gravely. 'I often see him sitting there watching us, when I come into this hall. I'm glad we got to know him before he died, and I'm very glad we were able to do one thing to please him.'

'Yes, he loved the dancing.' Joy's merry face was grave also.

'Would you——' Jen began hesitatingly. 'But I haven't the cheek to ask you!'

Joy laughed. 'What do you want us to do?'

Jen looked at Joan, confident that she would understand, and her trust was rewarded. 'Do you want us to dance to you?' Joan laughed.

'Would you? I haven't seen you dance. You were sitting on your thrones all the time.'

‘Just after lunch?’ Joy remonstrated. ‘Must we? You might have asked a little sooner, before I’d taken that second helping of pudding!’

‘Poor old thing! You shouldn’t have been so greedy!’ Joan mocked. ‘You sit still, and I’ll fetch your shoes and bells. You’ll have to hum the air.’

‘Coo-oo! That’s hard work!’ Joy moaned. ‘I’ll hum the minuet, but I don’t know about the morris. Jigs are another matter!’

‘Oh, you’ll do it, once we start! You can’t help it!’

In the window-seat Jen sat entranced while they danced in the sunshine, first Joan, then Joy, advancing to meet the other with outstretched arm and handkerchief, ‘capering’ round the room in high, graceful springing movements, each pausing to allow the other her turn, and ending at last in the middle of the floor facing one another, arms and one leg thrown up to a final jingle of the bells below their knees.

‘That’s “Princess Royal,”’ Joan remarked, as Jen applauded vigorously. ‘I don’t know how much morris there was about the step when we did it to Sir Antony. We hadn’t had very long of it, and I know my morris step was apt to vanish suddenly at times. It doesn’t now, of course.’

‘Oh, well, he didn’t know! He thought it was just ripping,’ Joy laughed.

They followed the jig with a slow, silent minuet, every movement graceful, and Jen sat leaning forward, chin on hand, to follow it intently. ‘That’s lovely! But how jolly different from the other one!’ she exclaimed at the end.

They both laughed. ‘More different than you know, my dear infant!’ Joy informed her. ‘One was a folk dance, t’other wasn’t. That’s all. Now Joan’s going to show you her abbey!’

CHAPTER IV THE CLOISTER GARTH

‘Come on, Jenny-Wren! I want you to see my abbey!’ Joan held out her hand.

Jen laughed as she caught it, and they ran together across the lawn. ‘Why am I Jenny-Wren?’

‘Didn’t you say your name was Jen Robins? Well, then!’

Jen laughed again, but accepted the explanation as sufficient. ‘Oh, isn’t this fine? And isn’t it *surprising*?’

A narrow shrubby path had led them to an ancient gate, studded with great nails, in a high wall. Joan unlocked this and showed a tiny garden, full of early flowers—pansies, wallflowers, late daffodils, lilac—with narrow paved paths among the flower beds. Beyond stood buildings, which had been hidden by the garden wall, and even to Jen’s ignorant eyes the long, narrow windows and finely-moulded arches were obviously ancient.

‘Twelfth century,’ said Joan, noting her look. ‘It was built by the old monks eight hundred years ago, and all the rooms they lived in are still here. I can show you where they slept and worked and had their meals, though the church has gone. This way!’ and she led Jen down a stone passage through the first building. ‘That’s a seat for the porter. Here’s a recess where they kept books. That was the abbot’s little garden we came through.’

‘Oh! Is this where Sir Antony saw you dancing?’ cried Jen, as the passage led them to a smooth, sunny lawn, with old gray walls and broken arches and ancient doors and windows closing it in.

‘Yes. Do you wonder we were tempted? This is the cloister garth. Come and speak to Ann Watson, and then I’ll show you just how the monks lived. She’s the caretaker,’ Joan explained, leading the way to an old pointed doorway. ‘She’s been here for seven months now, and we all like her very much. When I gave up the job to go to school, I offered it to her, as she was living in the village with her old father and mother. She’s a widow with no children, and I thought that was just as well. If there had been kiddies they might have got messing about with the buildings and have done some damage.’

A pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman came out to greet them, and Joan explained Jen’s presence. ‘So that you’ll understand if you see her about!’ she laughed.

‘Ann Watson lives in some old rooms right inside the outer wall,’ she explained to Jen, as she led her along the cloisters. ‘We lived there ourselves for a while, so we know they’re comfortable! Don’t you like her? She’s pleasant to speak to, and she learned all about the abbey very quickly. I think she must have been a servant in some London family before she married; nurse, or lady’s maid, perhaps; she says she lived in London. This is *my* room!—my absolutely private place, where I can get away from everybody,’ and she opened a door leading from the cloisters into the thickness of the wall.

It was a quaint little nook, furnished with rugs from the Hall, two basket chairs, a low table, and a few favourite books and pictures. Joan had gathered a handful of daffodils in the abbot’s garden, and she began to arrange these in a bowl, while Jen, delighted to help, carried away a bunch of faded wood hyacinths and fetched a jug of water from Mrs Watson.

‘Those bluebells were given me at the Coronation,’ Joan laughed. ‘But their day is over!’

‘Did you say you had lived here?’ Jen ventured, sitting on the arm of a chair and watching her. ‘And—and what did you mean about the caretaker? You said you——?’

‘Had to give up the job to go to school. I thought perhaps you didn’t quite understand. We were the caretakers, mother and I, for nearly two years. Yes, it’s queer, isn’t it?’ as Jen stared blankly. ‘Perhaps you’ll understand how odd it feels to be living at the Hall now! All the girls at school know all about it, of course. We lived here, and I showed people over the abbey; that’s how I know it so well. We didn’t know then that Sir Antony was Joy’s grandfather; mother knew, of course, but he wouldn’t let us be told till he was dead. He let mother bring us here on condition she kept it secret, and she had nowhere else to go. Father had died, and Joy needed country air; so we came here. Then when Sir Antony died he left money for us both to go to school, and so we found Ann Watson to come here. Now you understand!’

‘What a queer story!’ Jen marvelled. ‘But how ripping for it all to be yours and Joy’s now!’

‘Yes, ripping’s the only word for it!’ Joan laughed. ‘Now come out on the garth and have a dancing lesson! It won’t hurt you to know the movements, whether you join us or not. You’ll understand the dances better next time you watch them.’ And out on the garth she initiated Jen into the mysteries of siding and arming, set-and-turn-single, casting-off, and gave a demonstration of the morris step for her benefit.

During the week that followed, when all three girls waited anxiously for Miss Macey’s reply to Mrs Shirley’s invitation, Jen had many such lessons, on garth or lawn, or in the great hall at night. Joy was called upon to help, so that Jen might learn the ‘heys’ of morris and country dancing, and even Mrs Shirley consented to join in and make a fourth.

‘Good business! Then we can have “Rufty” and “Hey, Boys!”’ Joy said exuberantly. ‘You’re a sport, aunty dear!’

‘So long as it’s not “Goddesses,” I don’t mind helping you,’ Mrs Shirley laughed. ‘But I do draw the line at that.’

‘Why?’ asked Jen, as the elder girls laughed.

‘Because it’s all skipping. We’ll find some others one of these days, and then you’ll know!’ they assured her.

A week later, Joan and Jen, practising the ‘Bacca Pipes’ jig on the garth early one afternoon, with crossed sticks laid down to represent the long clay pipes, were interrupted by Joy, who came flying through the abbot’s garden and tresaunt passage waving a letter.

‘It’s all right! They’re coming as soon as we’ll have them! Aunty says to-morrow will do. There haven’t been any more cases, so they’re out of quarantine, but the school’s got to have all the drains up, so we can’t go there all term, and Miss Macey’s just awfully thankful to get the chance of bringing the girls here. They haven’t been living in the school while the drains were being tested, of course; they were all moved away to rooms in a hotel. So they won’t go bringing germs here. And Cissie’s much better, so we needn’t worry about her!’

‘You have been worrying a lot, haven’t you?’ Joan mocked.

‘Oh, and, Joan, Miss Macey says, may she bring twenty-one boarders! Isn’t she weird? Do you suppose she’s—well, forgetting things a little, with all this worry? There are only twenty of them.’

‘And me!’ Jen added. ‘But I’m here already!’

‘You are, Jenny-Wren, and that’s a fact! We shan’t forget it, either!’ Joy teased.

‘I shouldn’t have thought Miss Macey would count you in, when you’re here already,’ Joan observed. ‘Let’s see the letter, Joy!—“Twenty-one boarders, three mistresses, four

maids”—and then she goes on to say she’ll bring Jen’s clothes and books, and she hopes she hasn’t given us too much trouble!”—all three laughed at the characteristic touch.

‘But she hasn’t forgotten me, then!’ Jen pondered. ‘It is queer!’

‘Queer about the twenty-first boarder!’ Joan and Joy looked at one another. ‘What can she mean? She can’t have taken in any new girl just now!’

‘Not likely, when the whole town must know we’ve got an infectious disease!’ Joy mocked. ‘We’ll see who the mysterious Number Twenty-One is when they turn up! Come and help get ready for them, you two! What were you dancing? Oh, “Bacca Pipes”!’

‘Jen’s smashed her pipes to atoms, or she would have done if they’d been there,’ Joan laughed. ‘She will jump on her sticks. Show Joy, Jenny-Wren! Toe in the right, heel in the left! Now round your pipes! Remember it’s morris step!’

‘I can’t!’ Jen sighed. ‘My morris step goes west as soon as I think about anything else. What’s that?’ at the hoot of a motor-horn near by.

‘Visitors to see the abbey! Americans, probably; they come in crowds. Come on, take cover!’ and Joy made a dash for the arched door of the chapter-house.

Joan caught her just in time. ‘Don’t be a silly goat! That’s the first place they’ll go. Come home—no, it’s too late! In here, then!’ as the sound of Mrs Watson’s voice warned them that the guests were entering the garth.

Joan threw open the door of her retreat, and they all slipped in and closed the door. ‘Sanctuary!’ she laughed. ‘It’s not the first time I’ve been nearly caught. Oh, there are our bacca-pipes—sticks, I mean!—left out on the garth! How horrid they look!’

‘Look silly, anyway,’ Joy laughed.

But Joan had a sense of artistic fitness and a great love for the abbey. ‘It looks horrid. I’m an idiot not to have thought of it,’ she said, frowning at the white sticks lying neatly crossed on the lawn.

‘They’ll never notice,’ Joy remarked.

‘I should! It will spoil their first impression of the garth. Instead of looking beautiful, it will just look untidy. I feel like apologising,’ Joan murmured, but did not carry out the threat.

From the narrow window-slit they watched while Mrs Watson led the party of motorists to refectory, chapter-house, and sacristy, and told the story and date of each.

‘Ann Watson knows it all right, but she’s rather a stick,’ Joy murmured. ‘Now when Joan did it, people just saw the old fogies moving about in their white robes and black head-dresses; didn’t they, old thing?’

‘I don’t know. I’m sure I hope so!’ Joan laughed.

‘Some swank!’ Joy murmured. ‘Look at that fur motor-coat—topping! D’you think she’s a duchess?’

Joan’s eyes were on the small boy and girl, who, with the lady in the handsome fur coat, made up the little party. They were evidently a lively pair, whose interest in architecture, and even romance, soon wore off. The girl was the elder, and perhaps thirteen, with a mane of thick brown hair; the boy looked a year younger, and was fairer than his sister. For the first minute or two they followed Mrs Watson’s description of the buildings with interest. Then their attention began to wander, and Joan groaned as the girl made a dash for the crossed sticks lying on the lawn, struck a warlike attitude, and challenged her brother to combat. ‘Come on, Dick!’ her voice rang out across the garth. ‘There aren’t any windows to smash here! You sent my sword flying last time. Now I’m going to do for yours, old bean!’

‘Della!’—was that the name the fur-clad lady called imperatively from the old Norman archway that led to the refectory stairs? ‘I have forbidden you to use that word to Dick!’

‘Yes, mummy, I believe you have,’ Della called back easily. ‘But I didn’t do it *wilfully*, dear! I only forgot. You never mind when it’s quite a forget, do you, darling?’

Jen chuckled. ‘I know just how she feels!’

‘I’m glad Dick and Della will only be here for a few minutes!’ Joan remarked. ‘I hope they don’t manage to smash anything before they go. They ought to have keepers. See that!’ as Dick’s stick, caught up hastily and carelessly, flew across the garth at a skilful blow from Della’s evidently practised hand.

He sprang after it with a howl of wrath, and snatched it up close to the arches of the chapter-house. Then he came flying back to his sister. ‘Say, D.! There’s the most *topping* little room in there; the very place for a smuggler’s den! It would be just *It!* Come and have a look!’

They disappeared into the chapter-house, and Joy, with a shout of laughter at the look on Joan’s face, flung open the door. ‘Let’s cut across the garth and get home and prepare for the girls! It won’t do any good to look tragic, Joan; and why worry, anyway? They’ll be gone in half an hour. Let them turn your precious chapter-house into a smuggler’s cave, if it pleases them; it won’t hurt it for a few minutes. Let’s clear out! Their swanky mummy’s hearing all about saints and sermons in the refectory; and they’re both too busy to see us. Come on! It will only rile you to stop here and listen to them!’

Joan saw the force of this. She locked the door, and they all raced across the garth and disappeared into the tresaunt passage. ‘All the same, I’ll be glad when that lot have gone!’ she panted, as she locked the garden gate.

Joy laughed again. ‘Every step and every stone of the abbey is holy to Joan,’ she remarked to Jen. ‘I wonder we didn’t need smelling-salts to revive her! Smuggler’s den, indeed! The chapter-house! Where the monks never spoke above a whisper, because it was so sacred—but you’ve heard her, of course, Jenny-Wren! Smuggler’s den! I must tell aunty!’ and she went off into a peal of laughter again. ‘Oh, Joan! If you could have seen your own face!’

‘I’ll be glad to see the backs of Dick and Della!’ Joan retorted.

CHAPTER V

DICK AND DELLA

‘Well, children, will it do? Do you like it, Adela?’ and the lady of the motor, having finished her tour of the abbey buildings, turned to the children, who came racing to meet her after a thorough exploration conducted strictly on their own.

‘*Simply* topping, mummy, darling! There’s a hundred million different places to play in!’ Della’s approval was enthusiastic.

‘It’s just It, mum.’ Dick’s was no less emphatic.

‘It really is a very charming spot, and most quaint and interesting.’ Their mother turned to Mrs Watson, unconscious of how Joan would have shuddered if she had heard her. ‘It always makes Joan see red if any one calls the abbey pretty or quaint,’ Joy sometimes explained.

‘Ann, we had another reason in coming to see you to-day, besides curiosity as to your new home.’ The lady’s tone was full of condescension, as of a mistress to an old and trusted servant, and Ann Watson accepted it as her natural due, and waited deferentially for the explanation. ‘I have to go with my husband to South Africa for a few weeks. He has an important commission for the Government to carry out, and desires my company and help. We have to sail immediately, and we cannot possibly take these children with us. They would wreck the prospects of any political errand!’—and Dick and Della grinned at one another knowingly. ‘I had planned to leave them with my brother’s family, but they have illness in the house; and my sister simply declines to have the responsibility.’ The children looked at one another again. ‘My plan, therefore, is to leave them here in your care. You have had charge of them already for some years, and know them well.’

‘Too well!’ said Ann Watson’s dismayed face. Aloud she said hastily, ‘Indeed, my lady, it’s quite impossible. Miss Joan expressly said she would have no children living in the abbey. I could not possibly keep them here without her permission, and I know she would not grant it.’

‘Tut! Who is this Miss Joan?’

‘She owns the abbey, and lives at the Hall, my lady. If you cared to see her—but it is only wasting your time; she would never agree.’

‘I have no time to waste, and none to spend calling on cranky old maids,’ Lady Jessop began peremptorily.

Ann Watson spoke up quickly. ‘Miss Joan is a *young* lady!’ and as she said it she saw a vision of two red-haired schoolgirls dancing a morris jig on the sunny garth.

‘Young, is she? Then she should be more reasonable. You must talk to her, Ann. It will only be for three months at the most. There is nowhere else I care to leave the children, and a summer in the country will be good for them both.’ Dick and Della nodded solemn agreement to this proposition. ‘They have fallen in love with the abbey, and so have I. It is a safe and quiet retreat, where they can come to no harm, and they will be well cared for in your hands. I will send them down to you, with their baggage, in the car to-morrow.’

‘Indeed, my lady!’ gasped Ann, her breath quite taken away by this assault. ‘I daren’t do it, really, I daren’t. It’s as much as my place is worth, and I’ve been that happy here, I couldn’t bear to have anything go wrong now. Besides, it would put Miss Joan out so, and I couldn’t bear to worry her. She’s as pleasant a young lady as you’d find anywhere, and as kind as kind.’

No, I couldn't do it, not even to please you, my lady—not unless Miss Joan gives leave for them to stop.'

'Oh, *bother* Miss Joan!' Dick burst out wrathfully. 'Look here, Nanny, we're just going to stop, and that's all about it! I believe the old place is full of mysterious secret passages, and I'm going to explore 'em all; see?'

Ann Watson did see, and, knowing him of old, was more than ever resolved to stand to her position. 'Not without Miss Joan's leave, you aren't, Master Dick,' she said grimly.

'Where is she? I'll soon settle her! Let Dick and me go and have it out with her, mummy!' Della pleaded. 'If she's young surely she'll be sporty! I'll talk to her!'

But their mother knew better, and did not consider Della a good ambassador. 'Ann, this is all nonsense!' she said haughtily. 'I've planned to leave the children in your care, and, of course, I'll make it well worth your while. What possible objection could this Miss Joan have?'

'She objects to children in the abbey, my lady;' Ann did not think it wise to go into details of possible damage. Dick's imagination was quite equal to the task of suggesting them without help from any outsider.

'Tut! A silly prejudice, merely! When she finds they are here——'

'I couldn't take them here without her leave, my lady. I'm real sorry, but I couldn't do it.'

Lady Jessop knew her of old. She looked at her closely and saw that she could not move her. 'But this is very annoying!' she said angrily. 'I have no time to make other arrangements. It seemed an ideal plan to leave them with you, their old nurse; my mind has been quite easy about them. I never dreamt that you would fail me, Ann.'

'Could they not go to school for the short time, my lady?' Ann was anxious to help, so long as Dick and Della did not have to come to the abbey.

'My husband objects to boarding-school for children before they are fourteen, as you must know very well,' Lady Jessop said coldly, while the victims looked daggers at Ann.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Ann Watson looked apologetic but firm; Lady Jessop anxious and wrathful. Dick's eyes wandered hungrily towards the fascinating ruined buildings; Della, uninvited, was exploring the tiny kitchen and bedroom.

'I don't believe we could fit in, anyway,' she announced. 'There's only one bed. If I slept in it with Nanny, Dicky'd have to lie on the floor in the kitchen, and it's stone.'

'Oh, I could do with a shake-down anywhere!' her brother said airily, with masculine superiority.

'*Could* you? Not for more than one night!' she mocked. 'You'll have to get a bed in the village, and come up to see me sometimes. I'll let you know when I'm at home. I guess I'll have an At Home day, and you can come to call, and sit and balance your cup on your knee in the drawing-room.'

'Do you know any one in the village, Ann?' Lady Jessop's troubled face lightened. 'Is there any one you could recommend, with whom I could board them? You could keep an eye on them; I suppose you would not refuse to do that much for me? You must help me out of this difficulty, if you can; I really do not know what else to do with them. I simply cannot leave them in town with the servants and housekeeper. They'd just run wild, and it's better they should do it in the country than in town.'

'I'm fed up with town,' said Dick.

Ann Watson would very much have preferred Dick and Della should not be in the neighbourhood at all. She had been their nurse till a couple of years ago, and the thought of

having any responsibility for them was a nightmare to her. But her old mistress looked very troubled, and Ann was fond of her and anxious to help her if she could. 'There are my old father and mother. They have a cottage in the village,' she said doubtfully; and the mischief was done.

Lady Jessop's face lit up. 'Your parents, Ann? The very thing! Nothing could be better. You could answer for them, of course. Would they have room for the children?'

With a sinking heart but honest regard for the truth, Ann acknowledged that her parents would have room in their cottage. She gave the address, and promised dubiously to 'keep an eye on Dick and Della,' if her mother consented to take them in. 'But they mustn't come expecting to get into the abbey at all hours,' she protested feebly, conscious already that she had made a mistake and broken her compact with Joan in the spirit, though not in the letter, and very anxious as to the future.

Della and Dick looked at one another seriously. Then he protested, 'But I'm interested in old buildings, Nanny! You ought to be pleased! I always have been, don't you know!'

'Can't we go and see the cottage?' Della pleaded, hastily stifling him with a skilful change of thought. 'There's nothing more to stay here for, is there, mummy?—since Nanny *won't* take us in! I'd never have believed she'd be such a beast—so unkind, I mean! I should have thought she'd be simply delighted to see us again! Perhaps her mother's more sporting, though.'

'Yes, we must not stay any longer,' and Lady Jessop fastened her big coat. 'Give me your mother's address, Ann. How far off is the village? Half a mile? Good! Then you can very well keep an eye on the children, and I'll be glad to know they're in your charge.'

As the motor rolled away through the old gatehouse, with its sculptured saints and porter's lodge, Dick and Della fell into one another's arms in rapturous anticipation of good times to come, and paid no heed at all to their mother's warnings. And Ann Watson, very nervous as to what would come of all this, watched them go with a sinking heart and many forebodings as to the future.

CHAPTER VI

THE TWENTY-FIRST BOARDER

‘So you’re going to have companions of your own age at last, Jen!’ Mrs Shirley said kindly. ‘I’m afraid this week has been rather dull for you.’

‘Oh, no, it hasn’t! It’s been topping!’ Jen said swiftly.

She caught Joan as they hurried from room to room, making preparations for the coming of the girls. ‘It’s been a simply topping week, here alone with you and Joy,’ she said hurriedly, with more of shyness than the facing of the whole big school had required, for here her feelings were deeply touched and it was hard to speak freely. ‘And I think it was jolly sporting of your mother to let me come, and of you to be bothered with me. For it must have been a fag sometimes to put up with a kid like me, and I know I’ve been in the way. I think you’re both just awfully kind.’

‘Speech! Speech by Jenny-Wren!’ cheered Joy, coming in with her arms full of blankets.

Jen coloured swiftly. She had purposely tried to catch Joan alone. Then she retorted pointedly, ‘It’s Joan who has put up with me so rippingly, not you! You’ve been quite all right, but she’s taken trouble to see I’ve been all right too.’

‘Jenny-Wren, you see farther into a brick wall than most people. My opinion of you has risen considerably,’ Joy mocked, putting down her load and standing to look the smaller girl over with approval. ‘You have been looking on at us, and watching and making notes, and no mistake! There’s just one thing I’m deadly scared of, though, Joan.’

‘What’s that?’ Joan laughed, as she made up a single bed. ‘Give me those small blankets, Jenny-Wren! Well, Wild Cat?’

‘I’m scared of the things she’ll say to the rest of the kids about us,’ Joy said solemnly. ‘For a week she’s been watching us, with those big, dreamy, blue eyes, and taking us in and weighing us up, and making up her mind about us and all our faults and failings—mine, I mean!—and all your virtues and excellences, and *won’t* she have a lot to tell the rest of the infants? And she’ll always have an audience, for you know they always listen to any cackle about any of the Queens! She’ll give us away right and left—I mean me, again! She’s head over ears in love with you.’

Joan glanced at Jen curiously, not only to see how she would take this teasing, but because, to tell the truth, the same thought had occurred to her as a possible danger. Was Jen old enough to respect the privileges of the hospitality extended to her so readily? She knew that behind Joy’s mocking tone there was a touch of real anxiety. ‘Jen’s too loyal to do a shabby thing like that, Joy. Don’t be so soft!’ she said brusquely.

‘I’m not so sure,’ Joy teased. ‘I can just see her sitting with a circle of kids round her, and saying——’

‘Yes? Saying what?’ Jen exploded. She had been looking from one to the other during Joy’s mocking tirade, and waiting her chance with difficulty.

Joan glanced at her quickly, struck by her overwrought tone. ‘Help me turn this mattress, Jenny-Wren,’ she said quietly.

Jen, breathing quickly, came to help, then turned on Joy, her voice trembling with pent-up feeling. ‘What d’you think I’ll tell about you? I *shall* say that you’re a horrid tease sometimes,

and that you say heaps of things you don't mean!' She looked at Joan, who laughed and nodded leave to say so much.

'Oh, things like, "They never gave me evening dinner *once*, and living in a big house like that, too! Just cold meat and rice pudding at one o'clock, and cocoa and bread and butter at half-past eight! Really, I could hardly get enough to eat!" And then you'll tell them all about the wet day when we went in the kitchen and made toffee, and you found the griddle and told us what it was for, because we poor Londoners didn't know; and how you made scones for tea, Jenny-Wren—but you called them pikelets!—and Joan made a beautiful sandwich cake, and I could only manage rock buns! And all the kids will say, "Oh, Joy's no real use! She can tinkle on the piano and play at being a Queen, but she isn't a scrap of good at things that really matter!" And then you'll tell them how I had to be told which was the oven damper, and they'll all roar with laughing. Oh, I know!'

Joan was laughing too, sitting on the mattress to listen. 'It sounds as if we lived on cold meat and rice pudding!' she jeered.

Joy picked up the pile of blankets and stalked away. 'I know, Jenny-Wren! I'm quite prepared for the worst!'

Jen had given in and was laughing, too, greatly relieved that her anger had been unnecessary, since it was only tales such as these Joy expected her to tell. 'What a silly idiot she is!' she exclaimed.

'Now, help me make up this bed, Jenny-Wren. No, she's not a silly idiot. There was lots of truth behind all that nonsense. I don't mean that she really thinks you'd repeat anything we should object to, or that there is anything you could repeat, for that matter. I can't think of anything myself. We haven't any deadly secrets. But——'

'But I wouldn't! You know that!' Jen said indignantly.

'Of course I do. But Joy knows she's just a baby about some things, and she's beginning to feel badly about it, and she wouldn't like the girls to know. I've helped mother for so long, while Joy's been out tramping all over the country, you see. She knows every path and track for miles round, even in the dark. You've seen what a splendid guide she is when we've been for long walks, and how often I have to ask her the way! You can't know everything, and she is a baby about things in the house. Don't ever give her away to the girls, will you? She's afraid of being laughed at. That was the truth behind all her fooling.'

'I see!' Jen said soberly. 'Thank you for explaining. No, I won't, and of course I'll never tell anything except about how kind you've been. And—and what she said about thinking a lot of you was *true*!' And she fled, leaving Joan touched and amused.

In the passage Jen ran full into Joy, still wandering about with her load of blankets. 'I don't know where to put these things! O-o-oh! Is that you, Jenny-Wren?' and she collapsed on the floor under the pile. 'Go and ask Joan what I'm to do with them, there's an angel! Have you had a quarrel with Her Majesty, that you're running away so quick? Oh, that's bad grammar, and I must set a good example to the young! So quickly, I mean, my child! Make a note of it, I beg of you! Verbs have to be fitted with adverbs to keep them company, not adjectives. I'm getting ready for to-morrow, and the invasion of Miss Macey, three mistresses, four maids, and twenty-one boarders! Oh, by the way!'—she was sitting on the floor, surrounded by fallen blankets—'what about the twenty-first boarder? Who do you suppose it can be? Have you had any brain-waves yet?'

'Not a ripple, and I've thought heaps,' Jen assured her solemnly. 'It gets more puzzling the more I think. For even if she's counted me in, and she may have, you know, there's Cissie to

be counted out. She won't be leaving the hospital yet.'

'That's so; I hadn't thought of that. You've got a jolly good head, if it is a little one, Jenny-Wren,' Joy said with approval. 'No, we're not going to have Cissie scattering her germs round here! I can't imagine who——'

'What are you two doing out there?' Joan followed Jen out into the passage, then stopped to stare and laugh at sight of Joy squatting on the floor, with blankets all around her.

'We're discussing the mysterious twenty-first boarder,' Joy said, with dignity. 'I don't see what you're laughing at? I wanted to talk—as usual!—and I didn't know what to do with these things, so I just—er—put them down.'

'I butted into her. It was my fault,' Jen laughed.

'You did! And I doubled right up. Come on, help me pick them up, kid! Now, Joan, direct operations! Where do they go? And who do *you* suppose is the twenty-first boarder? You're clever; at least, people think you are! Haven't you a single idea? Why, even Jenny-Wren's had one. She says it isn't Cissie, anyway.'

'I haven't a notion. But we'll know to-morrow,' Joan laughed.

'True, O Maiden Aunt, we shall! But I want to know to-night! I'm just a baby, and I don't like having to wait,' Joy wailed.

They were all three out at the gate when the first cab drove up next afternoon. Luggage and maids had seemed to be coming all morning, and Miss Macey herself, and Miss Bates, the music-mistress, had also arrived early, Miss Macey full of gratitude to Mrs Shirley and of appreciation of the trouble she had taken, when she found bedrooms prepared for all her homeless flock. 'Oh, the girls did most of the work!' Mrs Shirley smiled, and Jen in the background smothered a laugh at thought of Joy buried in blankets on the top landing.

Joy was impulsively asking the question which had puzzled her so much. 'Did you count in Jen when you said twenty-one, Miss Macey? But even then that makes one too many, for Cissie can't be here!'

'I certainly counted Jen,' Miss Macey laughed. 'I was giving you the total number you might expect. I have been asked to take in one girl whose parents do not wish her to travel alone by train every day, nor yet to cycle so far. That is the explanation of the mystery, Joy.'

'Oh! We've been frightfully puzzled. And who is the extra one, Miss Macey?'

'Wait and see when they all arrive!' the head mistress laughed. 'Oh, quite a junior! No one you need get at all excited about, my dear Joy!' and she would say no more.

So the girls, in keen curiosity, raced down to the gate as soon as they heard the whistle and knew that the train had reached the station. Mademoiselle and several girls were in the only cab the village could provide; a shout from within informed Joy that all the rest were walking up with Miss Anskell, the English mistress. Presently a straggling procession came in sight, and Joan laughingly entreated Joy and Jen to come just inside the gate, lest they should stop the traffic.

In the whirl of excited greetings, as the elder girls, feeling their responsibility as hostesses, greeted their companions warmly, a wild, joyous shout rang out above the babel. 'Jack! You perfect dear! You jolly old sport! How *have* you worked it, old thing?' and Jenny-Wren hurled herself on Jacqueline Wilmot in an ecstasy of delight.

'Hallo! The Wren's found a friend!' Joy laughed. 'Goody! Is it the chum she talks about, that she got engaged to for a week? I suppose she's the mysterious twenty-first boarder! What luck for Jenny-Wren!'

‘Have you had a good time, Jen? What is it like here? Oh, what a gorgeous house! Is it really Queen Joy’s?’

‘It’s gorgeouser still inside! I’ll show you round! I *think* I know my way about at last! There’s heaps of it, though! I’m the old girl now, and you’re new! Isn’t it weird? Everything’s turned the other way round!’ Jen laughed excitedly. ‘But why are you here, Jack? Are you a boarder now? What’s happened?’

‘Father doesn’t want me to miss any more school; I missed a lot being ill last winter,’ Jack explained primly. ‘I’m getting all behind. And mother won’t have me go alone by train, and she thinks I’m not strong enough to cycle both ways every day. So she wrote and begged Miss Macey to have me for a boarder for this term. D’you think I’ll like it?’ She was plainly rather nervous of the new experience.

‘You’ll just love it!’ Jen prophesied. ‘I’ll look after you!’ at which they both laughed again. ‘Come and ask if you can sleep in my room. There’s got to be somebody, and I don’t think it’s decided yet who’s to have which bed. I was going to ask for Nesta, but that was before I dreamt you’d be coming. I’ve got the dinkiest little room, and it’s been all mine so far, but now there’s another bed in it, and somebody’s got to have it. It might as well be you, since we’re chums.’

‘Oh, are we?’ Jack laughed. ‘You’ve decided, then? I thought you wanted to be engaged for a week?’

‘We’ve been engaged for more than a week,’ Jen said solemnly. ‘It doesn’t matter that we haven’t been together; “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” you know! I’ve thought about you a *lot!*’

‘So’ve I. Then I vote we go ahead.’

‘I’m so glad to see you that I’m sure we must be meant to be chums,’ Jen argued.

On promise of very good behaviour, solemnly given by both, they were allowed to share a room. ‘You are friends?’ Miss Macey smiled approvingly on them. ‘I did not think Janet had had time to make friends with any one. I am very glad. You will suit one another excellently, I am sure.’

‘We’ve been engaged ever since the Coronation, Miss Macey,’ Jack explained eagerly. ‘Just to see if we liked it, you know! We’ve decided that we do, so we’re going to go ahead.’

‘And get married,’ Jen supplemented.

‘Being chums, you know,’ Jack added.

‘But you’ve been parted ever since the Coronation!’ Miss Macey smiled.

‘Oh, but we’ve thought about one another a *lot!*’ Jack assured her seriously.

She laughed. ‘Very well. Run along and be married, or be chums, however you like to put it! But don’t lead one another into mischief!’

‘Oh, we never would!’ they promised in chorus, and she laughed again as she dismissed them.

‘She’s a sport!’ Jen said, with conviction. ‘But if you ever call me Janet, Jack, I’ll—I’ll get a divorce!’

CHAPTER VII

A MYSTERY IN THE ABBEY

Much enjoying the sensation of being an old resident, Jen led Jack over the big house and showed the arrangements made for the comfort of the school.

A number of big guest-chambers, fitted with huge old four-poster beds, but with ample space for more, had had one or two single beds added, thus making small dormitories for three or four; and that first night there was much noise and laughter and discussion, till the difficult question was settled as to who should have the single beds and who should sleep with whom. After cubicles in a long corridor, these separate rooms were very exciting, and the mistresses had to intervene before the girls would calm down.

The big entrance-hall, the large breakfast-room, the music-room, and the library had been arranged as classrooms, leaving the dining-room for meals, and the big drawing-room as a sitting-room for the mistresses. A small drawing-room made a very pleasant lounge for the girls when not in classes, and Sir Antony's old smoking-room had been turned into a study for Miss Macey. Mrs Shirley had kept a little boudoir upstairs for her private use, with her bedroom, which Joan always shared, next to it. Joy chose to join the boarders and sleep in a 'foursome dorm,' with several of her friends, but Joan remained with her mother, and laughingly declared that they felt like lodgers in a corner of the house.

'How did you get on with the Queens? Are they jolly out of school?' Jack asked enviously, when their tour of inspection was completed, and she was unpacking in the little room she was to share with Jen. It was a very dainty little room, over the big hall, looking out across the lawn towards the abbey.

'Topping! Joy teases dreadfully, of course, and never means all she says; or half of it, for that matter. Joan's sporty, and I like her awfully,' Jen said warmly. 'I'll take you to see the abbey now. I'm sure she wouldn't mind—oh, bother! There's the tea bell! Perhaps there'll be time after.'

After tea, however, there was too much to do in the way of helping to unpack and arrange books, so that no time should be lost when the day-girls arrived next morning. The shelves in the library had been cleared and their books packed carefully and stowed away up in the attics, and each girl was given a definite corner for her belongings and told she would be expected to keep it in order. 'I shall find out now who are the untidy ones!' Miss Anskell laughed. 'There will be no lids to hide the condition of your desks here!' and the girls groaned in chorus. 'If you are wise,' she continued, 'you will keep your books upstairs, and only bring down each morning those which you know you will require during the day. Then you will have no difficulty in keeping your shelves in order. But it will demand some forethought, as we cannot possibly allow running up and down stairs during class hours. Any girl who forgets books will lose order marks.'

'It's a blue look-out for some of us!' Joy murmured.

'Oh, it won't worry you! You'll be able to do just as you like!' her friends said enviously.

'I shan't! Not if I know anything at all of old Ansky! Besides, we must play the game. It must be the same for everybody. But I know I'll forget things every single day.'

'You can't lose order marks for going upstairs in your own house! That would be simply silly.'

‘Officially ‘tisn’t my house at present. It’s school, my dear, and unless I’m mistaken we’ll find The Ant and Madam will see that we know it.’

It was not till after morning school next day, when the boarders had begun to feel at home and were gleefully conducting the envious day-girls over the lower parts of the house and round the garden, that Jack and Jen managed to slip away by themselves.

‘I must show you the abbey! It’s simply gorgeous!’ Jen spoke with whole-hearted sincerity and quite unconscious inappropriateness. ‘I’ve been there heaps of times with Joan. She’s awfully keen on it. I think I know enough about it to tell you a good deal. I know where she keeps the key.’ She brought it, and they ran off together, unnoticed by any one.

‘Will she mind?’ Jack asked doubtfully.

But Jen was serenely confident in Joan’s good nature. ‘Not a scrap, she won’t! She’s too awfully jolly. Perhaps I’d have been better to ask her before taking the key, but I’m sure she wouldn’t really mind. We’re only going to look.’ She was fitting the key to the iron-studded door as she spoke. ‘We’ll shut it behind us; then none of the other girls will come. She might not want a crowd in here, unless she came too; but she wouldn’t mind you and me.’

She left the key on the inside of the gate, and they set off to explore, Jen acting as showman with great glee.

‘The abbot’s house was over there. Here there was a hospital for old and sick people. Now come down this wee passage—there!’ pointing triumphantly to the green cloister garth and ruined gray walls and beautiful arched doorways.

‘Isn’t it absolutely topping?’ Jack whispered, her tone full of reverence if her words were not.

Jen might have owned the abbey, so great was her pride as she led her friend from cloisters to sacristy, from chapter-house to refectory, and explained how each had been used. Her story of the dormitory fascinated Jack, who declared she could see quite plainly the rows of simple pallet-beds and the old monks sleeping on them. ‘Just like a dormitory in a boarding-school! What did they put on at night, do you think? I suppose they took off the white robes and black head things? They’d get so crushed!’

‘I don’t know.’ Jen was rather staggered by this delicate question. ‘We’ll ask Joan! She’s sure to know,’ she added happily, and enlarged upon the night stairs, now vanished, down which the monks had gone piously to prayers at two o’clock in the morning.

‘Every night? They must have slept in their clothes, I guess!’ Jack cried, in horrified dismay.

‘Now come and see the rose window. Don’t slip in the dark. The steps are so narrow at the turn.’

‘What was that?’ cried Jack, as, dazzled by the sunshine after the shadowy winding stair, they reached the garth again.

‘What? Where? Who?’

‘I don’t know. But I saw something. Is the abbey haunted?’ and Jack shivered and looked round fearfully.

‘Not at this time, on a sunny day,’ Jen said seriously. ‘What did you think you saw? Wasn’t it just that your eyes were blurry?’

‘Perhaps. I thought something dark vanished off the green as we came down—in that direction!’ pointing towards the arched door of the chapter-house.

‘Perhaps Mrs Watson’s got a dog. I don’t think it could be a ghost. We’ll keep a look-out for it. Sure you didn’t dream it?’

‘No, I’m not a scrap sure,’ Jack confessed, which was not very helpful. ‘But I did think I saw something!’

‘Well, keep a good watch!’ and Jen, unbelieving but polite, led her to the sacristy to see the great rose window.

‘Now where shall we go?’ They stood out on the garth again, while Jen gave a laughing account of her dancing lessons and the interruption of ‘Bacca Pipes’ by the motoring party. ‘It goes like this!—you must imagine the crossed sticks. Toe in the right, heel in the left!—and then round the sticks, *this* way!—but the step’s very difficult at first.’

‘But you aren’t going in for dancing and chucking cricket and hockey, are you?’ Jack asked apprehensively, as she watched Jen’s struggles with the morris step.

‘There may not be much cricket this summer. Other schools won’t come so far for matches—what on earth was that?’ This time the cry came from Jen, but was echoed by Jack, as a shower of something small—was it pebbles? Gravel? Seeds of some kind?—fell pattering on their heads and shoulders.

With one accord they swung round wrathfully to find the criminal. But before them were only the three beautiful pointed arches of the chapter-house, looking as innocent as usual.

Jack and Jen made one swift, indignant rush for the entrance, sure that their assailant must be hiding here. But the little room was empty. They stared at one another blankly and listened, holding their breath, for the sound of retreating footsteps.

Then, as they heard nothing, Jen cried swiftly, ‘They must be hiding somewhere else! There’s no door here. You look in the sacristy again, Jack, and I’ll hunt round outside.’

Neither hunting inside nor out gave any satisfaction, however. They found no trace of any intruder, and though common sense told them some one must be hiding somewhere, they could find no sign of any one.

‘Shall we go and tell the woman who’s supposed to be in charge?’ Jack suggested. ‘Perhaps she’s got some children, and they’re having a game with us. It must have been one of them I saw.’

‘No, she hasn’t got any. Joan said so most particularly. I would, but I think we ought to go back. It must be getting late, and there’s dinner-time. We’ll tell Joan instead. I say!’—she picked up a handful of the pellets which had rattled about their shoulders, and, giggling, held them out for Jack to see.

‘What is it? Shot? It felt like it. Gracious, rice!’

‘They must have known we were a newly-married couple!’ Jen laughed. ‘How awfully smart of them! Come and tell Joan; she’ll know what to do. She ought to know her abbey’s haunted by ghosts who throw rice at respectable people!’

‘Oh, shall you tell her? Suppose she doesn’t like us having come here?’

‘Of course I’ll tell her,’ Jen said sturdily. ‘She must know about this—this outrage!’

They hurried back to the door in the wall. Then a cry of dismay broke from both, for the key was not in the lock.

‘I left it there!’ Jen wailed.

‘Perhaps Joan came and saw it, and thought she’d forgotten it last time she was here. I suppose the door *is* locked?’ Jack sprang to it and tugged valiantly at the handle. ‘Yes, I can’t move it. What *shall* we do, Jen? We must get back! It must be dinner-time!’

Jen stood back and surveyed the wall. ‘We could never get over that,’ she said gloomily. ‘It’s too smooth to climb, and anyway, look at the glass on top! We couldn’t possibly.’

That was obvious. Sir Antony had taken good care of that. The bits of broken bottles which crowned the wall so thickly were extremely modern and very sharp, and the wall itself had been newly repaired and pointed, and had no crannies nor ledges for clinging fingers. A more hopeless wall it would have been hard to find; and it was very high.

The girls looked at it and then at one another hopelessly.

‘Could the key have fallen down among the flowers?’ Jack ventured.

This led to a hasty, ruthless search among the pansies, but all to no purpose. The key was not there, the wall was impossible to climb, and the minutes were racing along past dinner-time. Jack and Jen grew more hungry and more desperate every moment.

‘Isn’t there any other way back?’ Jack pleaded.

‘I haven’t seen one. We’ll have to ask Mrs Watson to let us out, and go round by the road, that’s all. She knows me,’ Jen said valiantly. ‘She’s quite nice, Jack.’

‘But isn’t it miles and miles by the road? And it’s late already!’

‘And we’re so close! It’s simply beastly. It is a good way, but we’ll run, Jack. I don’t see what else we can do.’

‘But we’ll look so funny in these things! And we haven’t any hats!’

They were both wearing very short blue gym. tunics, with white sleeves and green girdles. The Hall had no gymnasium, of course, but gym. dress was the popular wear among the juniors for games and garden, and while both girls certainly wore their tunics very short from choice, Jen’s long legs stuck out of hers in a way which even Jack eyed askance, when it was a question of going down the road with her in it.

Jen laughed. ‘It’s dinner-time; we shan’t meet anybody.’

‘I know it’s dinner-time. I’m dying of hunger. Come on, then, if we must. You must talk to the old woman,’ and they set off rather apprehensively to find Ann Watson and confess their plight.

CHAPTER VIII THE SECRET DOOR

While Miss Macey and her household were driving up to the Hall that morning, Lady Jessop's motor was depositing Dick and Della at the cottage in the village. The parting with their parents did not depress them greatly, since it was to be only for a short time, and they were full of eagerness to explore their new surroundings.

On their visit the day before, they had seen only the old people, Ann Watson's parents. But as the motor drew up at the little gate, a small boy of about Dick's age, with a shock of untidy dark hair and sharp black eyes, came from the garden to the cottage door. 'Granny!' he called, and then leaned on the gate to stare at the big car.

Dick and Della repaid his stare with interest, seeing a possible playmate, who might be useful; but in their immediate plans Micky Clarke had no place, and for some days they had no close dealings with him. He watched them furtively from a distance, interested, curious, critical; but they had no intention of being hampered in their schemes by a third, or of confiding to any stranger their hopes and plans concerning the abbey buildings. They did not know if Micky could be trusted, and, anyway, he would be in the way and they did not need him. So they held him in reserve, ready to call on him if they required help from an outsider; and Micky bided his time, but watched them and listened, and grudged the hours when he must be in school and could not keep an eye on their movements.

Dick and Della postponed all unpacking and arrangement of their tiny bedrooms till night, declaring this could be done by lamp or candle-light. As soon as dinner was over, they changed the hats, coats, and shoes in which they had travelled for caps, jerseys, and plimsolls—'In case we want to do any climbing!' as Della said significantly—and raced away to see the village and woods. Great beechwoods covered all the side of the hills, rising steeply behind the abbey and the grounds of the Hall. These, bare still, as it was early May, but thickly carpeted with the rich red brown of fallen leaves, fascinated the two and kept them safely out of the way during the stir of arrival at the Hall all afternoon.

But next morning only one thought possessed them both. 'Come on!' said Della. 'The smuggler's den! Where are you going?' and she followed Dick curiously into the cottage kitchen, where he was rummaging in the cupboard, shaking and opening tins.

'Where's the old lady—Mammy Clarke?'

'Looking at her bees. Micky's off to school. What are you hunting for, Dicky?'

'The silly tins are all labelled wrong. Did you ever know a house where they weren't? This one says "Rice," but it's only white powder. And this says "Sago," and you can see it's salt. What about this—"Barley?" Doesn't rattle; must be another wrong 'un; ugh, it's brown and smells beastly!'

Adela, with feminine intuition, pronounced the brown powder to be curry. 'Do tell me what you're up to, old thing! I shall shake you in a minute!'

'Let's work this out!' Dick began impressively, staring at the misleading tins. 'I'm looking for something hard, like rice or barley, that would rattle when you shook it. As the tins are all wrong, I guess I'd better try——'

'Custard powder!' Della said, catching the idea at once. She made a dive for a tin, and chortled in triumph when it proved to be full of rice. 'Some day we'll sort them all out for Mrs

Clarke! Won't she love us? But what are you going to do with it, Dicky?' as he hastily filled two pockets with loose rice.

'Tell you as we go along. The old lady will be coming back. Let's do a bunk!' and they did.

'I thought,' he explained, as they raced along the road towards the abbey, 'that if folks came to be shown round, and we could hide somewhere, the rice might be useful, don't you know!'

'Oh!' Della considered this as she ran. 'I don't think we'd better, Dick,' she said at last. 'I'm game for anything you are, old chap, but we'd better use a *little* common sense. If we're caught pelting visitors with rice, they'll complain to this old Miss Joan, and she'll have us turned out. If she was away from home it would be different, but if she's there we'll have to mind what we do. Pelt Nanny, if you like; she won't give us away. She'll only be wild, and we can stand that. I don't think she'll give us away to Miss Joan unless we make her really desperate, but strangers would, of course.'

'Miss Joan's a plaguey nuisance!' Dick grumbled, but he generally accepted his sister's superior wisdom, though often unwillingly. The rice remained in his pockets, however.

Ann Watson greeted them without enthusiasm. 'Now, Master Dick, what be you wanting here? You've seen the abbey. Can't you be content? I'm not going to let you in to play here, and that's a fact.'

'Oh, is it?' Dick began, beneath his breath, for Adela, seeing the words coming, had kicked his ankle and pushed herself between him and Mrs Watson.

'Nanny, dear, we thought you'd like to keep an eye on us, as mummy said! And we're awfully puzzled about something; we want you to explain it to us. We had a dreadful argument in the car going home yesterday! Dick says you said that if the arches were pointed, it was Early English, and that meant it was built a hundred years later than anything with round arches. Is that right?'

'That's quite right, Miss Della. Round arches is Norman, and the earliest of all we have here.'

'Well, then, how's this?' and Della led her out on to the garth and pointed at the building in which Ann had her rooms. 'Your windows are Early English, and yet up above them those ruined parts are all round arches. But the bottom story must have been built first! I told Dick it wasn't common sense and he must be wrong, and he agreed it sounded like it. And yet you say he was right!'

'It's all right, Miss Della. The old rooms that were here first must have been falling down, and so they built new ones underneath, and propped up the roof, because the top was good enough then.'

'Oh, that explains it! I say, Dick!' She looked round innocently for her brother, and seemed genuinely surprised to find that he had disappeared.

'Where can he have gone to? Oh, perhaps he's gone into the abbey on his own! The bad boy, after what you said, Nanny! And without me, the mean thing! I'll go and find him, shall I?' And before Ann could protest she was off, to meet him at an appointed place behind the chapter-house.

Ann groaned. Had it all been a trick? And she had allowed herself to be taken in so easily! She went in search of them, but they were on the look-out and kept out of her sight without difficulty. Much perturbed and very angry, she went back to mind the door and wait for their coming out.

'Nanny's got the wind up,' Della whispered, as they lay in hiding behind a big lilac-bush close against the back wall of the chapter-house. 'It was a mean trick! I feel a bit bad about it, but we simply had to get in. Now, Dick, it's up to us to prove to her that she can let us come in safely. If we keep quiet and do no harm to anything, she'll soon get over it, and then she'll let us come again, rather than have trouble all the time. We've got our chance. But if you pelt visitors with rice, we won't get another. See, old thing?'

Dick saw, and regretfully abandoned the idea. Della's trick could not be played twice. They would not get into the abbey so easily to-morrow, unless by Ann Watson's permission. So it would be wise to be careful, and, as Della put it, 'Jolly well show her we aren't going to smash up the old place all at once.'

'All right, D.! I won't pelt any visitors,' he promised.

'This is a dinky little corner,' Della said, with approval. 'Just the secret hiding-place we want!'

They had agreed to meet by the lilac-bush which stood, laden with bloom, at the back of the chapter-house. But when Della reached it, her brother had called to her from somewhere out of sight, and she had found him crouching between the wall and the bush, in a dry, dusty hollow. 'You wouldn't think there would be so much room, would you?' she said in delight. 'The wall goes in a bit just here. It's almost like a cave, as you said. We'll fly back here if we hear any one coming.'

They set out on another thorough exploration of the ruins, and were just leaving the sacristy when the sound of voices made them draw back into hiding. Then they stared in surprise, as two small girls, in very short tunics and bareheaded, one with black bobbed hair, the other with long yellow plaits, came out from the tresaunt passage and turned towards the refectory stairs.

'Who can they be? They look quite at home!' Della whispered. 'No hats—gym. shoes and clothes—no Nanny to show them round!'

'The tall one's showing the black one,' Dick announced, as the girls paused on the garth, and Jen described the various buildings to Jack. 'They're only kids. We'll have a bit of sport with *them*!'

'But where have they come from?'

'Perhaps one of them's Miss Joan!' Dick grinned. 'Nanny said she was young!'

'Don't be silly! I'm going to find out where they came from,' and Della darted down the passage as soon as the girls were safely in the dark, winding refectory stair, Dick at her heels.

A swift survey of the abbot's garden showed them the gate and the key. Della turned it cautiously, and they slipped through into the shrubbery.

'Just for half a sec!' she panted. 'They'd have seen us in another minute from those big windows upstairs. We'll have to risk it going back. I say, Dicky! How weird! It's a school!'

'Is Miss Joan the head mistress, d'you suppose? Nanny said she lived here. This must be the Hall,' Dick said brilliantly.

They had crept down the shrubbery path, and the big house with its wide-open windows, and the lawn with groups of girls wandering about, lay before them. One little party came towards them, and Dick and Della, with a speed and silence worthy of Red Indians, and born of long practice, turned and crept back to the gate and slipped through into the abbey grounds again.

Dick locked the door and pocketed the key. 'We'll have some sport with those kids,' he said. 'Let's get back to our cave. We'll have to chance them seeing us, D. Scoot like

lightning!’

Fortune favoured them more than they deserved. Jen and Jack were at the moment descending the dark, winding stair from the monks’ dormitory, and only Jack, coming out to the garth dazzled by the sunshine, caught a glimpse of Della’s skirt as she ‘scoted like lightning’ into the chapter-house and followed Dick in a flying leap through the small, pointed window at the inner end, and so reached their retreat in safety.

They lay laughing and triumphant, sure they had not been seen since no shout of discovery had followed them, and talking over the strange fact of the school next door.

‘We’ll have a game with those girls before we’re done!’ Dick chuckled. ‘Fancy Nanny never telling us Miss Joan kept a school!’

‘It’s awfully queer!’ Della marvelled. ‘I do think she’s funny—this Joan person, I mean! Fancy keeping a school when all this huge place belongs to her!’

‘I say, old thing! Whisper; don’t shriek so!’ Dick warned her. ‘If anybody happened to be looking for us, we shouldn’t be a scrap hidden by this silly bush. ’Tisn’t half thick enough. So don’t go and put them on the scent by yelling like that. It’s all right so long as they aren’t really hunting for us, but if they did it wouldn’t be much use.’

‘That’s so. We’ll have to find a better place.’ Della lowered her voice cautiously. ‘I say, Dicky! There’s an old door here. Right low down, half underground! And it’s all patterns—look!’

The low round arch of the hidden doorway was filled by one great slab of stone, covered with half-defaced carvings—scrolls, and circles, and wings, and stars. Dick came to examine it, as well as the dim light filtering through the lilac-bush would allow.

Della’s fingers wandered over the carvings as she traced them out curiously. ‘This is weird! Look, Dick! It’s like a round stone marble stuck in the door! Perhaps there was a hole, and they stopped it up. Oh!’—she gave a smothered squeal of excitement, as the ‘round stone marble’ rolled under her touch, and, turning some hidden spring, released a lock. They heard the click, and the old door swung slowly open, showing a black entrance.

‘Dungeons! Or a secret passage!’ They spoke together, breathless joy in both their faces. Then with one accord they slipped inside and drew the door close.

Della, however, thrust her foot into the opening. ‘We can’t explore in the dark! To-morrow we’ll bring a torch. You haven’t got one on you, I suppose? Neither have I. We can’t do much without one.’

‘We’ll bring a candle too, to see if the air’s good.’ Dick spoke with superior knowledge. ‘Could we see anything if we pulled that bush right away?’

‘That would be a mad thing to do! Then everybody would see the door, silly! I don’t suppose anybody but us knows about it. We must keep it covered up.’

‘Right-o, old bean! Right as usual!’ Dick agreed warmly. ‘We’ll wait till we’ve got a torch. We don’t want those school kids following us in here.’

‘And we don’t want to break our necks falling down cellar stairs,’ Della retorted. ‘I wonder if it leads to a secret hiding-place, where they hid their treasures when there were wars going on, or when they thought Henry VIII. was likely to come along grabbing things?’

‘Or perhaps it’s a private way of escape from the abbey,’ Dick added. ‘I say, let’s get home now and bring a torch this afternoon! Nanny can’t say we’ve done any harm this morning, and we haven’t kicked up any row!’

‘We shan’t, either, if we’re underground in secret cellars,’ Della laughed. ‘But we must take care the school kids don’t see us coming out.’

'I'll go and scout. You wait here,' and Dick slipped through the doorway and round the lilac-bush.

Della did not approve of this. She considered her brother needed her to keep him back from rash acts. But he was gone, through the window into the chapter-house, to peep cautiously through, the doorway, so she waited, impatient and anxious.

The beautiful sharply-pointed doorway had a window on each side to correspond with it in shape. Dick stopped very suddenly as he reached the doorway, then slipped noiselessly to one of the windows. For Jack and Jen stood just outside, discussing morris jigs and their own future movements.

Their backs were turned to the chapter-house. The temptation was too much for Dick, whose pockets were still full of rice. A swift upward jerk of his hand, and the startled girls found it pattering on their shoulders. Before they could collect their scattered wits, Dick had vaulted through the end window and dropped into hiding beside Della, and the chapter-house, and even the lilac-bush, looked innocent enough to deceive Jen as she hunted wrathfully for their assailant.

'You silly goat!' Della whispered indignantly. 'I just knew you'd go and do something assy! Now they know there's somebody about, and they'll tell Nanny; don't you see, you idiot?'

'I couldn't help it. I simply had to! And we're one up on them, anyway. We've got the key!' Dick chuckled. 'How are they going to get home?'

'They'll have to ask Nanny to let them out, and then they'll give us away, and she'll be on the war-path, and we shall have a rotten job getting in again,' his sister said scornfully. 'We can't go yet, silly! We must let them clear out first, and as they can't go by their own gate we'd better make sure they've gone by ours. We'll wait till we've seen them cross the lawn, or we shall go running into them.'

Dick had to admit the truth of this. They crept into the chapter-house, and watched unseen as Jack and Jen, looking worried, presently raced across the garth and disappeared through the entrance-door. Even after they had heard its clang, Della insisted that they must wait a while, not being too anxious to face the wrathful Nanny.

But suddenly Dick sprang up with a cheer. 'D.! The bulliest idea! Yes, really! *I've* had one this time, and all by myself, too! *We'll* use the key, and get out without troubling Nanny! We'll get into the garden, and if we can't find the way to the gate it's funny! I *think* we've got our heads on the right way! It's after one; they'll all be in at lunch! And perhaps we'll meet those two kids in the road!'

Della laughed, her eyes snapping. 'It's a gorgeous plan, if they *are* all at lunch. We'll have to make sure of that first.'

'But you don't see the whole of it yet!' Dick insisted. 'This afternoon we'll come up to see Nanny, and give her back the key; we found it lying near the pansies, you know! She'll be awfully grateful, for the kids will have told her it's lost, and Miss Joan—bother her!—will be wanting it. So Nanny'll be awfully obliged to us, and she'll let us in again, because we haven't given her a scrap of trouble this morning. Now do you see?'

Della laughed again. 'We can try it on, anyway. It may work all right. *I* think Nanny will see through it! But we can have a shot at it.'

'Come on, then!' and Dick led the way across the garth and through the abbot's garden to the old gate in the wall.

CHAPTER IX

LATE FOR DINNER

Jack and Jen, looking apologetic and anxious, explained their plight to Mrs Watson. Knowing Jen well by this time and supposing her to be there by Joan's permission, Ann could not scold them for their presence in the abbey, but over the loss of the key she looked very grim.

'We couldn't help it,' Jen pleaded. 'We left it in the door and it's gone. We've searched everywhere. It looks as if somebody must have taken it.'

That was precisely what poor Ann Watson feared. She knew the key must be recovered without delay; the thought of it in Dick's hands, leaving the way into the grounds of the Hall open to him, was very disturbing. Her face was set and determined as she let the girls out. They ran off down the road, and she turned into the abbey to search for the culprits.

But by this time Dick and Della were safely in the now empty garden of the Hall, and, keeping well among bushes and trees, were making their way in the direction of the carriage drive which circled the lawn. In the same stealthy fashion, they crept down the side of the drive till they reached the gate, slipped through unseen, and were safely on the high road.

Ann searched everywhere for them, and for the key; she had no doubt, however, that if she found the one she would also find the other. She found no traces of either, and at last retired to eat, but not enjoy, her overcooked dinner, hoping grimly that hunger would presently drive the guilty ones from their hiding place. She realised, however, that they quite capable of having provisions in their pockets, and, having once stormed the fortress, of making a long stay. That they could keep so completely out of sight puzzled and worried her greatly, and she waited anxiously to see if the afternoon would bring developments.

Jack and Jen, racing back to school, felt very conscious of the unfitness of their costume for the high road. They met several people, and, as Jen said, 'felt awful idiots without any hats.'

'That girl and boy stared most of all,' Jack panted, as they entered the Hall gates. 'Did you notice? The girl had long brown hair and a white cap.'

'It's awfully funny!' Jen paused for breath just inside the gates. 'That's the boy and girl I was telling you of—who came in the car, and played with our "Bacca Pipes" sticks. They must be stopping somewhere near; I must tell Joan! The boy was all dusty; did you notice? He wanted brushing badly; looked as if he'd been crawling in cellars or under stairs. Oh, I saw them stare right enough! And he grinned, and she giggled.'

'*We* might have giggled, I think!' Jack said indignantly. 'The girl had been in the woods, I should think; her hair was all bits of leaf and stick, and her stockings were all green. If we look mad, tearing along without hats, they looked simply sights, both of them! Just like tramps!'

'Perhaps they thought we were running away from school,' Jen suggested.

'When any one can see we're racing towards it as hard as we can! I say, though! I know what they were laughing at! Your hair's full of rice, Jen!'

Jen laughed. 'Well, you've got some, too! I'll pick yours out and you pick mine out. We can't go back to school looking like a honeymoon couple!' and they solemnly removed the

grains of rice from Jack's bobbed locks and Jen's yellow plaits. Then they hurried on to meet their fate.

'Oh!' Jack gasped, as they came in sight of the house and found girls streaming out into the garden. 'They've finished dinner! What shall we do?'

'Go and see that we get some somehow,' Jen said gloomily. 'I couldn't hold out till tea, could you? I should die by three o'clock. I'm sure I should faint or something, if I didn't die.'

'Couldn't we find Joan and explain to her first?' Jack ventured, with a wholesome dread of the head mistress. 'She'd let us down easy, wouldn't she?'

'I dare say she would, but I'm not going to funk like that,' Jen said sturdily. 'I'm not going to her to say, "Please, Queen, hold my hand and don't let Miss Macey be cross with me!" No fear! We didn't mean any harm; she'll see that all right. I'm sure she's a sport, as I said! Come on! I can feel the starvation beginning already. I wonder what they've had for dinner?'

'Where *have* you been?' they were greeted by an excited crowd in the doorway, 'We've been searching for you everywhere!'

'Ansky's yelled for you all over the garden till she's got a frantic sore throat. She's awfully wild with you,' Molly Gilks said comfortingly.

'Did you think we were lost?' Jack, in spite of her starvation, was putting off the moment of confession.

'Oh, not for a minute, my dear kid,' an elder girl said airily. 'We'd seen you just before the gong went. We knew you couldn't be far away. Don't flatter yourselves any one got excited about you.'

'We knew you were bound to turn up all right,' Kathy remarked. 'But it's not usual to stop out all the dinner-hour and then come strolling in expecting to find yours kept hot for you. You'd better go and report yourselves to Miss Anskell.'

'I'd rather go to Miss Macey at once. We shall only be sent to her afterwards,' Jack argued.

'Right-o! Let's beard the biggest lion in its den first,' Jen agreed. 'We were in another part of the garden, through a gate,' she explained briefly, to satisfy the clamour of their classmates. 'And somehow it got itself locked, and we had to get out into the road and go miles round to get back. 'Twasn't our fault at all. I'm sure Miss Macey will understand that. She's a sport!' and she walked away with dignity, followed admiringly by Jack. 'I wasn't going to tell them about being in the abbey,' she said, when they were out of hearing of the crowd. 'Joan may say we oughtn't to have gone, and she wouldn't like stacks of them prowling round. Besides —' she paused impressively.

'Well?' Jack asked curiously.

'Well, there's *some one* in the abbey who hasn't any business to be there! You don't suppose it was Mrs Watson chucked rice at us and stole the key, do you? Somebody was fooling with us, and Joan's got to know, but nobody else must at present. So don't say anything about it to anybody, Jack.'

'I won't breathe a word,' Jack promised.

Jen broke into a giggle. 'I'd love to tell Miss Macey about the rice! But I shan't, not till I've asked Joan, anyway. Come on, Jack! She's sporty; she'll see it wasn't our fault.'

'It's not that. I'm not scared. But I'm hungry!' Jack said pathetically, and followed Jen valiantly to the head mistress's study.

CHAPTER X

THE GHOST IN THE WALL

‘I quite understand that you are not to blame because you found the door locked, and that this is the reason you are late,’ Miss Macey said very gravely. ‘But, my dear children, you had no right whatever to be there. If the gate had been standing open, I would not have blamed you for going into the abbey. But you had no right to touch the key without Joan’s permission.’

‘I never meant any harm, nor thought any, Miss Macey,’ Jen said sturdily. ‘I’m very sorry, and all that, but I really didn’t think she’d mind.’

‘I understand your feeling, of course, Janet. After living here for a week you naturally feel more at home than the others, and it was not surprising that you should wish to show your friend round. But, my dear, you must not presume on the kindness which has been shown to you.’ Jen grew very red. That would be a hateful thing to seem to do! ‘It was taking a great liberty to use Joan’s key, and I hope you will apologise to her at once.’

Jen looked scarlet and unhappy. ‘I—of course I will, Miss Macey! I’m awfully sorry. I never thought of it that way for a second. It sounds a rotten thing to do, the way you put it.’

‘The loss of the key is serious, of course. I trust it will be recovered very shortly, however, as you say you explained the matter fully to the caretaker?’

‘Yes, we told her, and she said she’d look at once.’

‘I hope it will soon be brought back. Now go and get your dinner, and be sure to tell Joan the whole story as soon as you see her. Report yourselves to Miss Anskell, and tell her I wish you to go to bed an hour earlier than usual to-night; you must ask for your supper before the others have theirs. I would give you bad-conduct marks, but I realise you had no actual wrong intention, though the act itself was wrong. It was more a mistake than a fault, however. But I cannot pass over your absence from a meal entirely.’

They thanked her, much subdued, though this was partly due to what Jack described as ‘the sinking pangs of hunger inside me.’

‘She’s jolly decent, a real sport, just as you said, Jen! Bad-conduct marks mean losing half-holidays if you get many of them. I’d heaps rather go to bed early, and have it over and done with. It doesn’t go down on your report, for another thing.’

‘Yes, she’s a good sort, and she understands,’ Jen said soberly. ‘But I say, Jack! I hope you won’t die before my eyes; I’d be very sorry if you did! But even if you do, I’ve got to see Joan and apologise to her before I go about dinner. I couldn’t eat anything till I’m sure Joan doesn’t feel bad about it, after the way Miss Macey spoke.’

‘But we must have some dinner!’ Jack wailed. ‘I’m all going wobbly inside, Jen—all to pieces! What did Miss Macey say? It wasn’t anything very awful!’

‘About taking liberties, and presuming on their kindness,’ Jen said briefly. ‘I felt rotten, and I’m going to tell Joan so and get things square before I do a single other thing. Miss Anskell can jolly well wait!’ She dashed after Nesta, who was passing. ‘Where are the Queens? I want to speak to Joan.’

‘You can’t. She’s out for the afternoon. Committee meeting of all the Queens at Broadway End. She and Joy have just gone off on their bikes.’

‘Oh!’ Jen stood staring blankly. ‘But why? Where?’

‘Come on and have some dinner!’ Jack pleaded, dragging her towards the dining-room. ‘They have meetings now and then, to talk over the Hamlet Club’s affairs and other business. Broadway End?—oh, that’s where Cicely Hobart lives; you saw her at the Coronation—the golden Queen, the second one. She’s President of the Club, and now that she and Marguerite have left, they have meetings at her house, and she gives them tea. So you can’t see her just now, Jen!’

Jen agreed disappointedly, and they sought Miss Anskell together. ‘You can eat, can’t you?’ Jack eyed her friend anxiously. ‘You said you couldn’t till you’d seen Joan, but she may not be back till late. You *must*, Jen!’

Jen laughed. ‘Oh, I suppose I can! But I’d much rather have seen her first.’

She was very silent during the solemn meal that followed Miss Anskell’s scolding. The girls were too hungry to feel the chilly silence acutely, but it certainly was not cheerful to sit in the big, empty room, under Miss Anskell’s severely disapproving eye, and be served with warmed-up meat and pudding by reproachful maids, who obviously wanted to get on with the washing-up. Jack hurried so much in her effort to appease them that she choked over her soup and was coldly reprimanded by Miss Anskell. Jen was very quiet, and as soon as they had escaped, Jack drew her into a quiet corner.

‘What’s up, Jen? You can’t see Joan, so what’s the use of worrying? That’s what *is* wrong with you, I suppose? You don’t mind Ansky’s rowing, do you?’

‘No, not a scrap. But I shall go on worrying till I know Joan isn’t mad with me. And there’s something else,’ Jen said unhappily. ‘We told Miss Macey we’d told Mrs Watson all about it. Well, we didn’t. We never said anything about the rice.’

‘But why should we?’ Jack stared, uncomprehending.

‘Because the idiot that chucked the rice must have been the same one that took the key. We know there was some one in the abbey. But we never told her. I thought I’d tell Joan, but now I think Mrs Watson ought to have known too.’

‘Oh, well! You can’t go back now! She’ll look for the key, and perhaps they’ll chuck something at her, and then she’ll know as much as we do. It’s her job to look after the abbey, not ours,’ Jack argued. ‘If there was somebody, she must have let them in, you know. Who do you think it could be?’

‘Some silly kids—from the village, perhaps. Joan won’t like it. If only I could tell her, I’d feel it was off my mind.’

But that was not possible, and Jen remained burdened and silent all afternoon and evening. When the day-girls had departed, on their cycles or walking to the train, the boarders settled down to evening preparation round the tables in the big entrance-hall, watched by the painted beauties on the walls, of whom Joy so much disapproved. The house, though an old building of Tudor days, had been brought up to date by Sir Antony, and the electric lamps on each table, covered with soft green shades, made the hall a very comfortable place in which to work. Miss Macey, passing the door, glanced in at the brown and yellow and dark heads bent over their work in the lamplight, and smiled contentedly. This was very much better than any hired hotel or furnished house!—and her gratitude to Mrs Shirley and the May Queens was heartfelt.

Jack and Jen were watching the clock, mindful of their punishment. Suddenly Jack poked her friend in the ribs. ‘Jen!’

‘What’s up? ’Tisn’t time yet,’ Jen responded, scarcely moving her lips, but glancing warningly in Mademoiselle’s direction. There was no need to be sent to bed still earlier!

‘What’s that?’ Jack murmured cautiously. ‘Listen!’

‘That tapping noise? Somebody hammering in the kitchen,’ Jen answered in a low tone, Mademoiselle being occupied with somebody else at the moment.

‘It doesn’t sound like the kitchen. It seems to come from over there,’ nodding towards the windows which looked on the lawn.

The tap-tap which continued so persistently did seem to come from that side of the room. Jack whispered, ‘Perhaps some one’s got into the garden and is having a bit of sport with us! Perhaps it’s the rice-person. D’you know telegraph-talk?’

‘Morse? No, I’ve often meant to learn, but never done it. Why?’

‘Well, I don’t either; wish I did! But that tapping’s jumpy, in a kind of pattern; don’t you see what I mean? It doesn’t go straight on; it’s long and short, and—and like a pattern! I don’t know how to put it, but it’s like beating time to a tune.’

‘Jacqueline, *taisez-vous!* If you must talk with Jenny, you shall come and sit by me over here,’ said Mademoiselle sharply.

‘Pardon, Mademoiselle!’ Jack apologised meekly, and apparently resumed her study of English geography. But from behind her atlas she shot questioning glances at Jen, who was listening intently. There was no doubt of it to any one, once the idea had been suggested. The tapping was not ordinary hammering; it stopped, and then went on again, at regularly-irregular intervals, in a rhythmic way, which could not be mere accident, but was very irritating.

Other girls were listening, too, and doubtful looks shot from one to another. Mademoiselle was unconscious of the growingly restive atmosphere for some time, but at last, after rebuking several whose minds were obviously not on their work, she broke out wrathfully, ‘What, then, is disturbing you all this evening? Here you have a beautiful room in which to work, and all comfort, and yet you rest not; you look at one another, you smile and nod. What is it that is wrong with you?’

‘That noise, Mademoiselle! It’s disturbing. We want to know what it is,’ one of the seniors ventured.

‘This noise of hammers? One of the maids at work, my dear, that is all. Now continue your studies!’

‘It seems to come from outside, not from the kitchen,’ Jack suggested. ‘Might I just look out of the window? We feel as if there might be some one peeping in at us out of the dark.’

Several girls shivered, and cast half-scared glances over their shoulders at the big windows, whose shutters were not yet closed to the twilight.

Mademoiselle said abruptly, ‘There is nothing there, but if it will satisfy you foolish children and allow you to continue your work, you may look. No, no, not so many! Not all of you! Only Jacqueline, who asked me, may look.’

But quite half the juniors had taken the permission as meant for them, and had conveniently reached the windows before they heard her call. They came back disappointed. ‘There’s nothing there. The garden’s quite empty.’

‘If the garden is empty, it cannot be more so, and therefore to say “quite empty” is needless and a bad use of your English grammar. So I have understood,’ said Mademoiselle grimly. ‘Now return to your work, and be foolish children no more!’

‘If she’s so frightfully particular about grammar, seems to me she ought to say “If it *be* empty!”’ muttered Kathy, resenting this criticism from a foreigner, and several girls glared disgustedly at the unconscious Mademoiselle.

Jack Wilmot had her revenge. ‘Since there’s nobody there, it must be a ghost, that’s all,’ she said carelessly, and her eyes snapped joyfully at sight of the consternation in some faces and the amusement and excitement in others. ‘Mademoiselle, Jen and I were to go to bed early, because we got locked out of the garden and were late for dinner. Hadn’t we better go and ask for our supper now?’

Mademoiselle, only too glad to get rid of Jack and her suggestive remarks, bade them hasten, and remember they were in disgrace.

‘I don’t feel in disgrace a bit. It wasn’t our fault; we couldn’t help it,’ Jack said decisively, as soon as she and Jen were safely out of the room. ‘It was some other rotter! And *I* believe it’s the same that threw rice at us, and that is tapping “Auld Lang Syne” or “God save the King” at this very minute, to make us think we’re haunted!’

‘It wasn’t either of those. I thought of them, but they didn’t fit,’ Jen laughed. ‘Perhaps it was only the servants, after all, Jacky-boy!’

Jack giggled. ‘A new name for me!—out of the song, of course! “Jacky-boy!—Master!” I’m glad I said that about the ghost! They’ll all get the wind up, and Mademoiselle will get frantic! Serves her right for trying to put us right in English! Like her cheek!’

‘I’m going to tell Joan about the ghost as soon as I see her. I believe it’s all the same person, too,’ Jen said, with conviction.

‘Oh, the girls will tell her about the ghost!’ Jack laughed.

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET PASSAGE

Dick, very reluctant, and Della, very determined, walked up to the abbey gates that afternoon to return the key to Ann Watson. For, when it came to the point, he was very unwilling to surrender his treasure, with all its possibilities, which were growing more glorious as he had time to think them over. But Della had thought the matter over, too, and had come round to his original way of thinking, so forcibly that she won in the end, as she always did. She was the stronger character, as well as the elder, and her arguments were unanswerable.

‘I know all that!’ she answered him impatiently, as he grumbled that they could now get into the gardens of the Hall when they wished. ‘But what does that matter, compared with our secret door? Who wants to get in with a lot of schoolgirls? And, anyway, we could get over the outside wall, if we really wanted to. It looked quite easy, just where we met those school kids in the tunics. I wonder if they were frightfully late for dinner, and what happened? Dicky, old bean, Nanny knows we’ve got the key; that’s the trouble. There’s no one else could have it. No one else has been in the abbey this morning. If we say we haven’t, she’ll give us no peace till she gets it somehow; and it wouldn’t be true, anyway! But *as* it’s no use to us, we may as well earn her undying gratitude by giving it back at once, just as you said. Don’t look so humpy! It’s your own idea!’

Dick grunted. The idea seemed much less fascinating now. ‘There won’t be much gratitude about it. She’ll want to know why we took it at all.’

‘We’ll tell her,’ Della said cheerfully. ‘We’ll say we were having a game with those kids. She’ll be so glad to see the key that she’ll let us go into the abbey, and that’s what we really want, old thing! She can’t say we were noisy or did any damage this morning. Got your torch and a candle? Come on, then, and beard Nanny in her den!’

Ann Watson received them sourly, but without being able to conceal her surprise that they came from outside. ‘Now Master Dick, where have you been all this while? And how did you get out; that’s what I want to know!’

‘Yes, wouldn’t you like to know?’ Dick jeered.

Della kicked him. ‘Now don’t you go trying to sneak past Nanny again! You can’t play that trick twice in one day. We’re going in on the square this time. It’s all right, Nanny, dear!’ as Ann stood with her back against the inner door. ‘It took me such an age to find him this morning—you can’t think! But I won’t let him do it again.’

Ann eyed her suspiciously. ‘I’d as soon have him as you any day, Miss Adela. Just tell me where you was hiding this morning when I come calling for you?’

‘Calling for us?’ Della’s face was blandly innocent. ‘We must have been in the garden of the Hall, Nanny, dear. We slipped out that way, so as not to trouble you. We saw two school kids race across the green, and we knew you’d be busy with them, so we just went the other way. There was nobody about; no one saw us! We’d found this, you see,’ and she produced the key triumphantly, and noted the instant relief in Ann’s harassed face. ‘We didn’t think it could matter if we went home for some dinner before we brought it back, and we didn’t want to worry your mother by being too frightfully late. But we knew it must be important, so we brought it back as quickly as we could.’

Ann seized the key. 'You didn't ought to have taken it at all, Miss Della. Why did you? Tell me that!' But her tone was less grim. She had not dared to hope they would surrender it so easily.

'Oh, Nanny, dear!' Della remonstrated against the unreasonableness of this. 'We didn't think at first that it *was* anything important! Besides, we wanted to have a game with those kids. You never told us Miss Joan had a school next door!'

Ann eyed them severely. She was not anxious to reveal the fact that the dreaded Miss Joan was only sixteen. 'You hadn't any business to keep the key for half an hour, Miss Della, nor to go through the gate neither. What if——'

'If Miss Joan had caught us? She's a regular ogre, your Miss Joan! Oh, but we took good care she didn't, Nanny, dear! Now we'd like to go into the abbey again. You'll let us, won't you? We didn't do any harm this morning, and I'm sure we were as quiet as mice,' Della wheedled.

'What was you doing all that time?' Ann's English was apt to desert her in moments of excitement. 'And where was you hiding when I come looking for you, Master Dick?'

'Oh, just in some bushes!' Dick said airily. 'One time we were in the sac—what d'you call it? But you didn't see us.'

Della gave him a quick look of admiring approval. This was the way to put Nanny off the scent, if she had begun to guess they had a definite hiding-place. 'We weren't doing anything, really and truly, Nanny, except prowling round and watching those kids in the gym. things!'

'And what be you wanting to do this afternoon? You've seen every bit of the abbey by this time.'

'Oh, no, we haven't! There's such heaps of it! And we want to see bits of it again! Let us in, Nanny, dear! We'll be quite good and quiet! And we did find that key for you! Don't be a pig! You know you're awfully grateful. Don't you want to show it?'

'Be a sport, Nanny!' Dick urged. 'We aren't going to smash the old place up, honestly we aren't! Why, you can never tell! Perhaps some day you and Miss Joan may be glad you let us in!' he hinted darkly.

Della gave him a furious look, for such an obvious suggestion would have roused her curiosity to a pitch which would have had to be satisfied. But Ann Watson's mind had not the quickness of Della's. She wondered vaguely afterwards what he had meant, but at the moment was more exercised by Adela's remark. She was very grateful for the safe return of the key, whose recovery had seemed likely to be a difficult matter, and she was sufficiently sentimental to let Della's plea, "Don't you want to show you're grateful?" sway her better judgment. They had given no trouble that morning, she had to admit—barring their method of gaining entrance in the first place!—but there would certainly be trouble if she refused to admit them now. It was easier to yield, since there really seemed no danger in it. She had not time to think of Dick's mysterious hints at the moment. Knowing that Joan was safely out of the way for the afternoon, she yielded, for the sake of peace and quietness, and admitted them, only cautioning them to keep out of sight if visitors came to be shown round the ruins. They promised fervently, and sped away across the garth, and she hoped ruefully that no harm would come of it, and felt she had been weak again.

They went straight to the lilac-bush, after making sure she was not following them, and as they went Della told Dick what she thought of him for his foolish remark.

'You've got *no* sense!' she ended scathingly. 'You just do what you want to, without thinking what will come of it. That's feeble, and awfully soft. If Nanny hadn't been soft, too,

you'd have given us away altogether. What did you mean, anyway?"

'I thought if we found a secret chamber full of treasures, they might all be jolly glad.' Dick sounded rather hurt by her tirade.

'Well, you needn't have jabbered about it yet! Let's find the treasures first,' Della said practically.

With the help of his candle, Dick tested the air in the low passage and found it good. So, with torches lit, they closed the stone door, all but a crack, and went cautiously forward down broken stone steps.

'Look out!' Dick said suddenly. 'This silly stair doesn't fit. Don't fall over the edge!'

'Doesn't fit? How? How can it not fit?'

'Keep to that side. There's a space here between the steps and the wall.'

'It's too small for me to fall down, though,' and Della came to peer down the crack. 'How mad of them not to put the steps all the way across! What do you suppose they were playing at?'

'Gets wider as you go down. The steps don't, but the passage widens out, so there's more space. Perhaps there's a cellar. Don't fall over and smash yourself, that's all. I say, D.! There is a passage!' He had reached the bottom first.

'Right away into the middle of the earth!' Della murmured ecstatically. 'Wouldn't those school kids give pounds to be here?'

Chortling at their superiority over unconscious Jen and Jack, they crept forward along a long narrow tunnel, with arched roof, and so came in time to a parting of the ways, where another passage ran out on their left.

'Two ways to choose!' Della whispered, rather awed by the mysterious silence everywhere. 'Now what do we do?'

'This!' chortled Dick, conscious pride radiating from every inch of him. For once he had scored, and he knew it. He produced a compass and held it close to his torch, and with a squeal of joy Della leant over his shoulder.

'Dicky, old thing, that's great! I never thought of bringing one! Can you guess whereabouts we are?'

'Chapter-house looks south,' Dick said in a business-like tone. 'Sun was blazing right into it at twelve o'clock. We're going east; remember that turn just at the bottom of the stairs? There's the needle—so we're going due east. That means we're going towards the Hall. See that?'

Della considered the position of the chapter-house, the garden-gate, and the Hall as they had seen them that morning, and followed his reasoning easily. 'Yes, I see that, of course. D'you think it's a passage leading to the Hall?'

'Looks jolly well like it. This other one goes off to the west. Let's follow it first.'

'Oh, but why? I'd rather go to the Hall—heaps! It sounds far more exciting. This one—to the west? It must go right away from the abbey and everything, out into the fields somewhere.'

'That's just what I bet you it does, but I want to make sure. We'll come back and go along to the Hall presently,' said Dick peremptorily, and as he held the compass Della had perforce to agree.

'But why, Dicky, old bean? Where do you think this goes?'

'Away from everywhere, as you said. A secret way of escape from the abbey, out into the woods or fields somewhere, don't you see? And it might lead to some place where they hid

their treasures. If they expected to be attacked, an underground way out, with a secret treasure chamber, might be jolly useful.'

Della agreed, and they kept a sharp look-out for possible secret doors as they stumbled along. Their progress was very slow, as in many places the roof had fallen in and partly blocked the passage, and they had to scramble over heaps of rubbish on their hands and knees.

'My stockings!' Della groaned. 'It reminds me of something—oh, yes! That cave in Sark last summer; the one with the long tunnels, where you climbed over rocks all in the dark and fell into pools on the other side; gorgeous sport! This is something like it, but without the pools.'

'Grève de la Ville,' said Dick precisely. 'I'm not so sure about the pools, though. Here's a jolly old puddle that isn't a bad imitation. Mind your feet—there! Messy kid!' as Della splashed into the water and kicked it up over him.

'You warned me too late,' she retorted. 'I was in before you said a word. I believe you did it on purpose. Why is there water down here, anyway?'

'Underground spring. It's all dry again along here. How far does this silly passage go? I'm sure we've come a mile.'

A mile of such scrambling had been very hard work, and both were tired. 'Let's give it up for to-day,' Della proposed. 'We must be miles away from everywhere. Are we still going due west?'

'Straight as anything,' Dick consulted his compass. 'Must be somewhere right in the woods, I guess. You know how close they come down behind the abbey. I'd jolly well like to find the way out before we turn back.'

They went on a little way, but the passage seemed to have no ending, and Della's clamour for a return grew more and more insistent as her disappointment increased. 'It isn't going anywhere; we're only losing ourselves, and we've miles to go back,' she urged.

'Must go somewhere. They didn't make all this just for fun; it's not an accident, either. They made it for a secret way to some place,' Dick insisted.

'Well, let's come back in the morning and try again. It's five o'clock, and I'm starving. We've been buried in the centre of the earth for more than an hour.' Della's nerves were beginning to get shaky. 'Are we going deeper down, do you think? Shall we come out presently to—to——'

'Yes, what?' he mocked. 'The fire in the middle of the earth?'

'N-no, not quite that. But water, or something, as they do in mines.'

'Don't see any sign of it. If anything, I think we're going up. We ought to, if we're under the big hill where the woods are.'

'We'll have a jolly long way to go up, if we're under that! Let's go back, Dick, and have some tea before we try the passage to the Hall!'

Dick was tired, too, so he agreed, though reluctantly, and they retraced their steps, and found the scrambling much harder work now that they were only going back, with no excitement to spur them on. When they reached the dividing of the paths, even Dick was willing to go back to the upper air for a time, and to sit in the sunshine and eat the buns they had brought with them. He would have dropped down beside the lilac-bush, but Della prudently chose a spot farther away from their treasured secret door.

'We don't want Nanny to think we're always haunting the chapter-house. She might come along at any minute, you know. Come over here!'

‘Right, as per usual, old sport!’ said Dick, and they had their picnic and lay resting in the evening sun in a corner of the cloister garth, near the old Norman doorway leading to the refectory stairs.

They looked so quiet and well-behaved, even picturesque, in fact, lying there with their heads close together, Della’s thick brown mane covering her shoulders like a cloak, that Ann Watson’s fears concerning them were allayed when she presently passed with a party of tourists. As a matter of fact, Dick and Della were consulting the compass again, and deciding just whereabouts on the great tree-covered hill they might have been that afternoon—a very idle proceeding, of course, and the merest guesswork. But Della was leaning over Dick, thrilled with excitement, and her stockings were tucked well out of sight.

Ann sighed with relief. Her fears had been groundless. The children had not been noisy; indeed, she was amazed that they could have been quiet for so long; they had done no damage and given no trouble. She smiled on them in approval as she passed, and they chortled with perfect understanding when she had disappeared up into the refectory.

‘Nanny’s decided we’re the good little boy and girl out of picture-books, after all! That’s one up to us! Come on, Dicky, old bean! We must follow that other passage to-night and see if it really leads to the Hall. I couldn’t sleep unless I knew. But I don’t know how long my torch is good for. We must have used a lot this afternoon.’

‘We’d better only use one at a time, then,’ Dick said prudently. ‘We were silly idiots to waste them like that this afternoon. If they give out, we’ll be done.’

Della shivered. ‘Just suppose they’d both gone out when we were miles away in the dark! We’ll always keep one in reserve after this, Dicky, old sport!’

‘Trouble is, you can’t tell how much there is in the rotten things,’ Dick observed very truly, as they strolled carelessly across the garth, lest Nanny should be watching from a window. But once out of sight among the buildings, they ran like rabbits for their lair, and so slipped behind the bush and were lost to view.

CHAPTER XII

‘RULE, BRITANNIA!’

‘Joan, is the Hall haunted?’ cried Nesta.

‘Joy, there’s something weird about this house of yours!’

The May Queens, jumping off their cycles at the front door just as supper was ready, were met by a storm of questions, all relating to ghosts and noises.

‘Haunted, you sillies?’ Joan laughed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Of course it’s haunted!’ Joy teased. ‘Did you ever know an old Tudor mansion that wasn’t? It’s haunted by ghosts that shriek and wail, and wander up and down the corridors at midnight, the men in armour, carrying their heads under their arms and dragging chains, the women in trailing white robes, wringing their hands and moaning. There! I’ve done my best for you! What’s up?’

‘It’s none of those that has been haunting us,’ they retorted. ‘Our little ghost taps on the wall all the time we’re doing prep.’

‘Oh? Somebody hammering, I suppose? Or was it one of you having a game with the rest?’

This suggestion was denied indignantly, and Joan and Joy were given a vivid account of the evening’s disturbance.

‘It sounded like tunes!’ Nesta declared. ‘If Joy had been here she might have known what it was. That’s the weird kind of thing she *would* be able to do!’

Joy dropped a mocking curtsy. ‘Not being much good at ordinary useful things! I’ll see if it comes again to-morrow night, and then I’ll try my hand on it. But it won’t. You’re imagining it, the whole silly lot of you!’

‘There’s the supper gong! Imagining it! That’s just silly, Joy. Wait till you hear it yourself!’

‘Yes, I’ll wait,’ Joy said sceptically. ‘It never used to tap before you came! Is it going on still?’

‘No, it stopped about an hour ago.’

‘It knew I was coming home!’ Joy laughed. ‘I’ll not have any ghosts about my house—except the official Tudor ones I told you of, of course!’

‘Don’t keep on about that, Joy. You’ll scare the kiddies. Some of them are quite small enough,’ Joan warned her. She looked round the supper-table. ‘Where’s Jenny-Wren?’

‘Gone to bed early, and Jacky-boy too.’

‘Oh? What’s wrong? They’re not ill?’ Joan asked in dismay.

A laugh rang out. ‘Oh, no! They’ve not got dip!’

‘But they were nearly an hour late for dinner,’ Nesta informed her. ‘Playing about in the garden somewhere. They said they found some gate locked and couldn’t get back. So they caught it hot from Madam and Ansky, and everybody, in fact; and were sent to bed early.’

‘I’m sorry. Jen hasn’t been any trouble to us here. But perhaps she’s different with a lot of others; kids often are!’

‘Jen is anxious to explain to you just what happened, Joan,’ Miss Macey said, later in the evening. ‘I will leave her to tell the story herself. Don’t go to her to-night, however. If she and

Jacqueline are not asleep by this time, they ought to be; and, as they sleep together, there is no need to disturb them.'

Jen and Jack had deliberately lain awake in the hope that it would occur to Miss Macey to send Joan up to hear their confession. As time passed, the hope faded, and they fell asleep at last, much disappointed.

They caught her before breakfast, in the garden, and, running up to her, were greeted with a mock-stern air.

'Well, Jenny-Wren, what have you got to say for yourself? I hear you were sent to bed in disgrace?'

'Has Miss Macey told you all about it?' Jen asked anxiously. 'I'd *much* rather have told you myself!'

'She said you would, so she didn't tell me anything. I hear you were very late for dinner? Sit down here, and tell me all about it!'

Sitting one on each side of her on the steps of the old sun-dial, they eagerly poured out their story, with many apologies from Jen for having taken the key. 'I never thought you'd mind,' she pleaded.

Joan nodded with understanding. 'But I'd rather you didn't go in again, Jenny-Wren. I don't mind you and Jack, but if you go, the others will expect to go too. And I don't want a crowd in there without me.'

'Oh, I understand now! I won't go again!' Jen promised eagerly. 'I knew you wouldn't be angry really. But something awful happened, Joan!' and she hurried on to tell of the loss of the key, the incident of the rice, and their late arrival for dinner.

Joan sat, chin on hands and elbows on knees, looking much troubled. 'I must go and see Ann Watson at once,' she said at last. 'We must get the key back, of course. That's important. But if there really was any one in the abbey, that's very serious too. I can't allow that. I'll have to see what she has to say about it. It looks as if she wasn't being quite straight with me. Come in to breakfast. I'll go and see Ann before school. Bother! I suppose I'll have to go round by the road, as you had to do yesterday. What a nuisance! I hate feeling cut off from the abbey!'

'I'm awfully sorry,' Jen ventured. 'But we never dreamt the key could go and lose itself, Joan.'

'It didn't. Some one took it, and that's what is troubling me,' Joan said anxiously, as they went towards the house.

'Here's a boy!' said Jack, and coming up the drive they saw a small boy.

'It's Micky Clarke; Mrs Watson's his aunt. He goes up to the abbey every morning with her milk and letters, and does her errands. Perhaps he's brought a message for me.' Joan went to meet the boy.

'Perhaps she's found the key!' Jack whispered excitedly.

Joan returned in a moment, holding up the key triumphantly. 'She says she found it yesterday afternoon; he doesn't know where. I shall have to find that out, of course. Now I can go in by the tresaunt again. But I'll have to see her about that other business. The next visitors to get pelted with rice might not be a newly-married couple, and they might not see the joke. And I must know who was in the abbey. I won't have any one playing about there. Ann ought to have brought this back as soon as she found it. But, of course,' Joan added justly, 'she can't leave the abbey in the afternoon, when visitors may turn up, and very likely she saw me ride past and knew I wouldn't want it. Jenny-Wren, you know where I keep this! Hang it up for

me, will you? And don't say anything to the rest about all this yet. Wait till we know a little more.'

Jen's face was radiant as she sped away. 'Isn't Joan ripping?' she whispered to Jack, as they met at the breakfast-table. 'She might quite well have said, "I shall put the key in some new place, so that you won't be able to find it!" But she never says a word; just lets me go and put it away again! I wouldn't touch it now if you paid me a thousand sovereigns!'

'I want to hear your tapping ghost!' Joy teased the boarders, as they went into classes. 'I want to see if I can guess what tune it's trying to play!'

'It's all very well for you to mock, but we did hear weird tapping,' the girls insisted, and crowded round the day-girls to tell them all about it.

'Have you been to the abbey yet?' Jen managed to squeeze her way through the crowd round Joan just before the gong rang for classes.

'No, I'll go in the dinner-hour, Jenny-Wren. Since I've got the key safely, there's no such frightful hurry, and the girls all want to know about our meeting with the other Queens yesterday.'

Jen nodded and slipped away to her own class in the library, wondering much if the 'tapping ghost' would be troublesome again this morning. But for the juniors the morning passed peacefully.

Not so with the seniors in the big hall, however. For a couple of hours, indeed, all was quiet, and Joy cast laughing challenging looks at the boarders. 'Where's your ghost? Produce your ghost! I haven't heard a single tap!' she mocked at recess.

But during the last period the silence was suddenly broken by the same unmistakable sound: 'Tap!—tap-tap-tap!'—and every girl in the room sat up and looked at Joy.

Joan was not present, as she and the other candidates for matric were having a special literature lesson in Miss Macey's own room. Joy sat erect, her lips tight, her eyes on the window, her mind strained to catch the secret of the rhythm.

Miss Anskell was just realising the general tense atmosphere, and in another moment would have connected the disturbing sounds of which she had heard from Mademoiselle with the excitement on the faces of the girls, when Joy eased the minds of all, and added immensely to her reputation, by announcing loudly, "'Rule, Britannia!" Excuse me, Miss Anskell, but I must get to the bottom of this! It's past a joke!'

'"Rule, Britannia!" So it was!' the girls whispered in amusement and relief, as Joy stalked towards the window. 'Isn't she the limit where anything musical's concerned?'

The tapping had ceased abruptly, in the middle of a bar. Miss Anskell glanced at the clock. 'You may put away your books, girls,' she said, though it was ten minutes too soon. She knew the uselessness of any further attempt at English grammar and analysis; there was something far too real and exciting to analyse here!

The girls crowded round Joy, whose examination of the windows had yielded no result. The obvious suggestion that some one hiding just outside had been guilty of the disturbance was once more easily disproved. But all the girls were now more in earnest to discover the explanation of the mystery, for Joy, by identifying the rhythm of the tapping, had proved it due to no ghost and no accident.

'There must be somebody fooling about with us, and we're jolly well going to find out who it is!' was the general verdict.

Miss Anskell went off to consult Miss Macey as soon as her class was over. Joy turned to the girls, her face serious for once. 'Girls, we'll get to the bottom of this, of course, and at

once. But I must tell Joan about it first. If you'll go out into the garden as usual and talk it over there, we'll tell you as soon as we know anything; really, we will. But it will help us a lot if you'll go and discuss it outside.'

Reluctantly the girls yielded and dispersed. They would much have preferred to stay and help in any search that might be made, but Joy's tone had been distinctly that of 'Lady of the Manor,' and with her position as ex-Queen, gave her a certain authority, which they recognised.

As they reached the door of the big hall, there came, from the same direction as the tapping, the clear, triumphant crowing of a cock; then silence.

The girls, half frightened, stared at one another and at Joy.

Joy sped past them with a brief, 'I must find Joan. She's brainy; she'll know what to do!'

'Twon't be awfully jolly nice to do prep. in here after dark!' murmured Nesta, as they went out on to the lawn.

'Tisn't a ghost!' Molly and Kathy mocked her nervous fears. 'But it's *somebody*! I wonder if Joy will really get the better of them?'

'Joan's more likely to. She'll find them, if anybody does!'

Joy caught Joan just taking the abbey key from its nail. 'Joan! There's somebody somewhere in the hall making noises at us! I'm not making it up. That tapping was "Rule, Britannia!"; and it crows like a cock, and you know we haven't any chickens on that side of the house!'

Joan saw the point, particularly of 'Rule, Britannia!' at once. 'Come with me to the abbey, Joy. I believe we shall get to the bottom of it there. Some one has got into the abbey, and is fooling about; they threw rice at Jen and Jack yesterday, and I fancy they stole this key too. I'm going to make Ann Watson tell me how she got it back.'

'Oh! But I don't understand! Won't you come and help me search in the hall?'

'I want to see Ann first. I'll tell you as we go along, Joy. You haven't heard yet about Jenny-Wren and her friend yesterday.'

Joy listened intently, and with great indignation, to the story as they went towards the abbey. 'But it wasn't the poor kids' fault they were late! Miss Macey was mean!' she said wrathfully.

Joan could see Miss Macey's point of view, however, and brushed this aside. 'The question is, are we hunting down two sets of mysteries, or only one? There's the one who threw rice at the kiddies—I love them for that, though it must have been only an accident! But Jack and Jen are playing they're newly married, you know'—Joy chuckled. 'And stole the key, and then probably gave it back to Ann Watson; or put it in the door again where she would find it; that's what I'm going to find out now. That's one; and that one's in the abbey, and hasn't any business to be, and Ann knows all about it, and hasn't told me!'

'And hasn't any business not to have told you! That's right! Take breath about it, though. You're wound up, just as I am sometimes,' Joy remarked. 'Well? I'll go on! The other one taps tunes at us and crows, all in the big hall. How can they be the same, Joan? T'other one's in the abbey!'

'Yes, but it's queer if we've developed two ghosts at the same moment!' Joan said swiftly. 'Perhaps there's some connection between the abbey and the Hall that we never dreamt of! We haven't lived here very long yet. I thought I knew all there was to know about the abbey, but it's possible I don't.'

Joy looked at her admiringly. ‘Do you mean secret passages, and priest’s chambers, and all that? It *is* an old house, of course. It’s quite possible. Joan, you are the limit for brainy ideas! I’d never have thought of a secret passage in a thousand years!’

‘I’ve been thinking more about this than maths and literature this morning,’ Joan confessed.

‘Bother maths and literature! They aren’t in it with this, either for importance or thrillingness!’

‘Now keep a good look-out. Jen says Jack saw “something dark” run across the garth,’ Joan commanded, as they entered the abbot’s garden and passed down the tresaunt. ‘My idea is that Ann has let some village children in to play here, and perhaps they’ve discovered things we don’t know of yet.’

‘Ann will hear about it if she has,’ Joy laughed.

Ten minutes later the whole school, sitting at dinner and wondering why the Queens stayed so long in the abbey, were startled by Joy, who came flying across the lawn and fairly hurled herself into their midst. ‘The most awful thing!’ she gasped. ‘Miss Macey, somebody’s begun cutting their name in the wall of the chapter-house—*cutting their name!* Joan nearly fainted; really, she’s in an awful state about it! Jen and Jack, you’ve been there alone. Do you know anything about it? Or has any other girl been there? The first letter’s plainly cut, and it’s a J.’

CHAPTER XIII

THE LETTERS ON THE WALL

‘We never did!’ Jack and Jen asserted stoutly. ‘We never would! And J stands for heaps of things besides us! Why, it might be Jones!’

Miss Macey looked very grave, however. ‘You two were there without leave and alone. Are you quite sure neither of you——’

‘Miss Macey, I—I loathe people who scrawl their names everywhere!’ Jen cried. ‘Father’s talked to us about it, and it’s just a rotten thing to do! Only cads and common people would do it, even on ordinary trees or seats or fences. But in that lovely old abbey—Joan’s abbey!’ Her indignation nearly choked her. ‘I know how she loves it, and how sick she’ll feel. I’ve been there with her often, and I wouldn’t hurt a—a hair of its head!—I mean, I wouldn’t hurt one stone, even with a drawing-pencil! I don’t care if the second letter’s E, or even if the third one’s N! *I* didn’t cut them, and I never would, and Joan knows I never would. She didn’t send you to ask us!’ she challenged Joy.

‘No, she didn’t. I just thought of it myself,’ Joy admitted. ‘But no one else——’ and then she stopped short.

‘Some one else *has* been there, and you know it quite well!’ Jen flashed out at her.

‘Well, but it’s queer that it should be a J. That’s what put me on to you two. And the second letter’s begun, and it looks as if it might be going to be an E,’ Joy insisted.

Jen snorted derisively—a most improper sound to address to a senior, a Queen, and her hostess.

Miss Macey said gravely, ‘Be quiet, both of you. Has any other girl besides these two been in the abbey since our arrival?’

‘Didn’t know the kids had. When did they manage it?’ Peggy Gilks murmured.

‘Miss Macey, we haven’t had any chance. We’ve either been in the garden or in the house all together. I think we could all—I mean each—prove an ally—what’s the word?’ Muriel remarked.

Miss Macey smiled. ‘An alibi? Yes, I expect you could.’ Then she looked very grave again. ‘But this is a very serious matter, girls, and distresses me deeply. When we were asked to come here, so very kindly, it was on the express condition that no damage was done either to the house or the abbey. We have been here two days, and serious damage has already been discovered. Joan will inevitably feel it is due to our presence here. I am deeply distressed and ashamed, and feel it is necessary to discover the culprit without delay. If any one of you is guilty, I hope she will confess the truth at once.’

Inevitably she looked at Jen and Jack. Jack, indignant and scarlet, looked almost guilty as she shrank in dismay. Jen’s face flamed with angry colour. ‘Miss Macey, it wasn’t us. I’m quite sure Joan won’t think so. I—I’d like you to ask her, please. She’s the one that matters most.’

Miss Macey looked very grave as she bade them continue their meal and then go out into the garden for half an hour. ‘We shall get to the bottom of this, of course, Joy. Tell Joan to come to me as soon as she comes in.’

In the garden Jen found that, on the whole, public opinion was against her. She was still quite a newcomer; no one but Jack and the two Queens had had any chance to learn to know

her yet. The girls felt the disgrace to the school in this happening, and Jen was informed by several of the treatment she might expect if her guilt were proved. At the same time she was urged to own up, as it was a rotten trick to try to get out of a thing once she had done it. Her wrath flared high, and she turned on them as she would have liked to turn on Miss Macey if she had dared. Seniors and juniors alike, they should hear what she thought of them.

‘You’re so jolly beastly clever, all of you! And you don’t know a thing about it, really. It’s you who are a rotten lot, all of you, going for me when I haven’t done a thing. Joan knows all about it, and she’s never said she suspected me. There *is* somebody else who may have done it, and I just believe they did do it, too! No, I won’t tell you what I mean. I won’t tell you a thing. Joan told me not to, but even if she hadn’t I wouldn’t tell you. You can just wait, the whole lot of you. She’ll tell you when it’s time for you to know. Jack and I know!’ And she took her friend’s arm and stalked away, injured innocence written all over her.

The younger girls looked impressed and curious; the elders laughed. ‘All the same, the kids were there! And if they’d started JE, it does look rather bad. I say, Joy! when is Joan coming back? Jen’s got the wind up frightfully; she’s been slanging us all round. And she says there’s somebody else. What does she mean?’

‘Guess I was in too much of a hurry, as usual,’ Joy said ruefully. ‘I’d forgotten the ghost! But why should its name begin with JE, too? It’s weird!’

‘The ghost? That taps “Rule, Britannia!” in the wall? But it couldn’t be in the abbey, too!’ Edna cried, as the girls crowded round Joy eagerly.

‘Joan thinks it is. She’s going to wait there till it comes out. She thinks there’s a passage or something.’

‘Oh! But why?’ Muriel pondered.

‘Because it threw rice over Jacky-boy and Jenny-Wren yesterday,’ and Joy told the whole story, so far as she knew it.

‘And the kids couldn’t find anybody?’ Peggy asked wonderingly.

‘Not a hair of any one. But it must come out sometime, and there’s only one gate. So Joan’s going to wait.’

Joan and Joy, on their way to interview Ann Watson, had gone round by the chapter-house to look for any possible hiding-place for the throwers of rice. ‘There isn’t one, of course,’ Joan remarked. ‘I know every inch of it, and there isn’t any possible nook or corner.’

‘We’ll look, anyway,’ Joy insisted.

As they entered the plain little stone chamber, where hiding-places seemed quite out of the question, there facing them in the back wall was that hideous JE, cut with a penknife—not large, and not finished, but plain enough to catch Joan’s eye in an instant. It was a sight she had never seen before in her two years in the abbey; no wall had ever been defaced by any marks in Sir Antony’s time. ‘Look!’ she panted, and caught Joy’s arm, her face flaming. ‘Oh—Joy! In *here*, of all places!’

‘J E!’ gasped Joy. ‘Those wretched children! They were here yesterday! I’ll go for that Jen; don’t look so awful, Joan!’

Joan did not hear her. She had darted forward to examine the scrawling marks more closely. ‘In the chapter-house! It’s wicked!’ she gasped, before she realised that Joy had gone.

Of all the abbey buildings she had always loved this best; for its beauty of arching doors and windows and wonderful vaulted roof, and for the view of the green garth through its pointed windows; for its history, as the most sacred part of the abbey now standing, coming second only to the destroyed church itself—so sacred that its ancient owners had never spoken

in it above a whisper, and had always kept a light burning here; and for association, for her own sake. It was here that Cicely Hobart had tried to tempt her to take the great chance of her life, in the Hamlet Club's scholarship to Miss Macey's school, and that she had refused the gift she so much longed for and striven successfully to gain it for Joy instead. It was a very sacred spot to Joan, and even if the ugly marking could be covered up she would never quite forget that it had been there. Her eyes were full of tears as she looked closely at the defaced wall. Then, with set face, she raced away to find Ann Watson.

From within the cloisters two small guilty figures watched her go, and then with one accord made for their lilac-bush and lay in hiding in the dark.

'You are an awful idiot, Dicky Jessop!' Della fumed. 'It's all up now. I don't know who those red-haired girls are, except that they're evidently twins, but it's quite plain they belong here, and if ever a girl was tearing raging mad, it's that one that's away to hear all about us from Nanny. I guess they're something to do with Miss Joan, and the other one's gone to tell *her*. Nanny'll give us away, and then we'll be done for.'

'They can't find us here,' Dick said sulkily.

'No, but we can't get out!' his sister snapped. 'And we've only got a few sandwiches, and our torches are giving out. What are you going to do? Sit in the dark till you starve? If I hadn't got you back this far, you'd have stuck in that long passage without any light.'

'There's the way out to the woods. It must lead to some kind of door.'

'You can go all those miles without a light, if you like. I'm not going to,' Della said definitely, and a gloomy silence fell on them both.

Joan, grim and determined, entered the little sitting-room within the walls which was now Ann Watson's home. Once it had been hers. Here Miss Macey's girls had sheltered from the storm, on their first visit to the abbey, after the morris dance in the cloisters; here Miriam Honor had sung to them; here Cicely had come to tea; here, too, had come Sir Antony, to ask that she and Joy would come to the Hall to dance to him, and here he had seen the big portrait of Joy in her robes and crown.

'Ann, who is in the abbey?' she asked briefly.

Ann rose with a guilty start. 'In the abbey, Miss Joan? I—I don't——'

'Yes, you do. Who is in the abbey, please?'

'It's—it's not much past twelve o'clock. It's too early for visitors, Miss Joan.'

'I'm not talking about visitors. You know that. Who is in the abbey, Ann? It's no use trying to put me off. I've got to know. Do you know that whoever it is has begun cutting his name in the wall of the chapter-house?—the *chapter-house*?' Joan's voice shook with indignation.

Ann Watson dropped into a chair and covered her face with her apron and sobbed. 'Oh, Miss Joan, I'm sorry!—I'm sorry! I didn't know as they'd done that—the young limbs! And so nice and soft-spoken with their promises, and so quiet when any one looks at them! It's that Master Dick has done it, but Miss Della, she's just as bad. Oh, Miss Joan, what could I do? They've been one too many for me, they have!'

'Please tell me all about it,' Joan said grimly. 'Who are they? Children, I suppose? Dick, did you say? And——?'

'Miss Della—Miss Adela. I was their nurse for seven years in London, till Watson come along, and a fine life they led me, too. Then when I married, Lady Jessop—their mother, Miss Joan——'

'Jessop!' Joan remarked. 'Yes, Ann?'

With many sobs, Ann told the story of Lady Jessop's visit and urgent request, and of her own predicament. 'I didn't want them within a thousand miles of me, Miss Joan; but what could I do? I told them to come and ask you, but her ladyship couldn't spare the time.'

'We saw them. I remember saying to Joy that I was glad those two children wouldn't be here long. But you could have told me they were in the village, Ann.'

'I—I was afraid,' Ann sobbed. 'And I did mean to keep them out, Miss Joan. But they got round me every time.'

'They won't get round *me!*' Joan said grimly. 'Well, you've done the mischief now, Ann. It's no use crying any more. I suppose they're in the abbey now?'

'They came in this morning,' Ann confessed shamefacedly.

'And you haven't let them out? That's good enough. I'll wait till they come along. They'll be getting hungry. You don't know where they hide in the abbey?'

'I never see a sign of them when I go round with folks, Miss Joan. They do manage to keep themselves out of sight something wonderful.'

'They're underground,' Joan said briefly, but did not trouble to explain. 'I'll have some dinner with you, Ann.' She had glanced at the dish of cold meat on the table, and the soup pan on the stove. 'Anything will do. I'm on duty here, you see. Master Dick Jessop isn't going out of this abbey till he's had a chat with me.'

'I'm sure I'll be glad for you to talk to him, Miss Joan.' Ann hastily brought another plate. 'It's what he wants. He's a lot too much for me.'

'It's what he needs, anyway, and it's what he's going to get. Oh, yes! He's too much for you.' There was mild scorn in Joan's tone. Strong herself, she had little sympathy with weakness such as Ann's.

'Master Dick isn't any worse than Miss Della,' Ann ventured, with a sentimental impulse to stand up for the younger culprit, and a feminine leaning towards the masculine.

'Then I'll talk to Miss Della, too,' and Joan ate her dinner with a grim, set face.

She retired to her own private room opening off the cloisters, and sat there with the door set wide, so that no one could enter or leave the abbey unseen by her, and her mind went over all the possibilities of the situation. Could the children by any chance escape from the abbey by some other way? There was no other gate but the one leading to the gardens of the Hall; she had left this unlocked, but she hardly thought they would attempt it again in daylight. But there certainly must be a passage, whose abbey entrance she had not yet located. Dick and Della had evidently discovered it by chance and used it as a hiding-place whenever Ann came near. And one end of that passage led to the big entrance-hall of the house; they had followed it, discovered in some way how close they were to the schoolgirls at their work, and made use of the knowledge to annoy and mystify them.

'Awfully silly, of course! It shows what mere kids they must be,' Joan said to herself. 'We were bound to find them out once they began that kind of thing. If I'd been in their place I'd have taken jolly good care I didn't give myself away so soon! I expect it's the boy; evidently the girl can't manage him any more than Ann Watson can. Well, we can do something there, anyway!'

She found pencil and paper, still keeping one eye on the garth, and scribbled a note to Joy and took it to the caretaker. 'Ann, you might take this up to the Hall, to my cousin. I'll keep an eye on the gate, and if visitors come I'll start showing them round. I don't think I've forgotten much of it yet! But be as quick as ever you can, for I shan't dare to go out of sight of the gate

for fear those little terrors slip past me. Or I'll lock the gate on the inside. But be quick, anyway. I don't want to have a scene with Dick and Della before strangers.'

Ann hurried away, and Joan sat on the steps of the old Norman doorway at the foot of the refectory stairs and gazed across the garth at the windows of the chapter-house. She rather enjoyed the sensation of being once more in sole charge of her abbey, with no caretaker to come between her and her loved ruins; often when busy at school she had thought rather jealously of Ann Watson in her place at home. But she hoped no one would come to-day, while those ugly marks showed so plainly on the wall! She wondered what would be the best way to hide them.

Unseen by her, a small head peeped up beside the lilac-bush to peer through the window in the back wall of the chapter-house. Unfortunately—or fortunately, from Della's point of view—Joan was sitting exactly in the line of the doorway, though across the garth, and could be seen plainly. Della retreated hurriedly, and drew Dick into hiding again.

'She's there, sitting as if she meant to stop for days! I don't believe we shall ever get home! And the other one's gone to fetch Miss Joan! Oh, Dicky, old bean, what a rotten hole you've got us into this time!'

CHAPTER XIV

PLANNING A CAPTURE

‘Whisht! Listen!’ whispered Della.

The stone door was closed all but a crack, but the crack was enough to allow voices in the chapter-house to be heard. Some one was talking up there.

‘I am more than sorry this should have happened, Joan, and shall apologise most earnestly if we find any one of my girls is to blame.’ Miss Macey had come with Joy to see the damage for herself.

‘Miss Joan’s there!’ gasped Della, and shivered in her shoes. Dick tried to look as if he did not care, and failed miserably.

‘It wasn’t one of the girls, Miss Macey. I never thought so for a moment. I know who did it. Would you come along to my room, and I’ll tell you all we know, and what I want Joy to do?’

‘Guess I’ve made a bit of an ass of myself, as usual,’ said another voice, so like the last that it might almost have been a continuation of her speech. ‘For I’ve made Jenny-Wren and Jacky-boy both madder than mad, by saying it must have been them. After all, Joan, it’s J, and it might very well be E!’

‘Jen! Jen would never do such a thing! You didn’t tell her *I* thought so, I hope!’

‘No, she swears you won’t. But she got the wind up frightfully—oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Macey!’

‘There is much need!’ Miss Macey said severely. ‘Really, Joy, your language is only fit for a schoolboy. In your position in the school, it is deplorable that you should use such slang.’

‘I’m awfully sorry! Joan’s always pulling me up,’ Joy sighed. ‘It’s only since I’ve been to school, you know, Miss Macey. I caught it there. We never used to talk like that at home.’

‘Joy! How can you? Do be quiet! You’re only making matters worse!’ Joan laughed in spite of herself. ‘Miss Macey, I’m sorry to miss afternoon classes, but the person who cut those letters is still in the abbey, and I’m not going out till I’ve caught him. I’ll tell you all about it if you’ll come and sit down.’

Della poked her brother in the ribs. ‘She knows it’s you, anyway. I say, Dick, it sounds as if Miss Joan went to school! Isn’t it weird?’

‘Seems to me we’re stuck here for ever,’ Dick said gloomily. ‘Could we get out by that gate?’

‘No, they’ll watch it now. Might as well try to get into the house!’

‘We haven’t found the door, and we can’t go punching the wall, because the room’s always full of girls,’ Dick said in disgust.

‘I think *they’ll* begin punching the wall, and then they’ll find the door, and then it *will* be all up with us!’ Della said vigorously. ‘It would have been a lot more sensible just to squint at them, as I wanted. Your silly tapping gave the show away, and as for that cocky row you made this morning—well, what could you expect after that? It was simply *mad!*’

Dick grinned sheepishly. The temptation to startle the girls had been too much for him. ‘It did make ’em jump no end, though!’ he chortled. ‘As for the tapping, how could I know they’d spot what tune it was? That red-haired girl is too smart by half!’

‘I guess they’re smart enough to know we’ve given ourselves away now,’ Della groaned. ‘With Miss Joan and Miss Something-Else sitting out there on the green, and the red-haired girl after us from the house—well, what *are* we to do? I ask you that, Dicky, old thing!’

‘Looks as if the game might jolly well be up soon. There’s one thing, though, if you’ll risk it, D.’

‘What’s that? Oh, you mean the long passage up into the woods! If only we knew how long our torches are good for!’ Della groaned. ‘And we don’t know that it does lead out somewhere. We may find the way blocked when we get there.’

‘Way’s blocked here, anyway. And we might get out into the woods, and then we could laugh at the whole jolly lot of them!’ The idea was very fascinating to Dick. ‘Come on, D.! Be a sport and risk it! We can’t sit here till they walk in on us!’

‘Do you really think they will?’ Della asked dubiously.

‘More’n likely. They’ll know, if they only stop to think, that there must be a passage down that wall and that some one was hiding in it, making noises at them. They’ll hunt about till they find the way in; there must be a way, you know; and then they’ll be after us. Have we got to sit here and wait for them?’

Della did not like the thought of that at all. Neither did she like the thought of the long dark passage to the woods, with torches which might fail at any moment. But every other way of escape seemed to be cut off. ‘All right! I’ll be a sport and risk it,’ she said resignedly. ‘But if all our lights go out, I shall just sit down, wherever we are, and you can go back and fetch candles, Dicky, old bean!’

Out on the cloister garth, sitting in the chair Joan had brought for her, Miss Macey heard those parts of the story which Jack and Jen had confided only to Joan—the vision of ‘something dark’—the incident of the rice. ‘Of course, the kids—children, I mean—who threw it didn’t know our two were so newly married!’ Joy put in, and Miss Macey laughed.

Ann Watson’s confession supplied the link between the intruders in the abbey and the ghost at the Hall, and Miss Macey agreed with Joan’s theory of an unsuspected passage connecting the two buildings.

‘We don’t know all about our own house yet! But we really haven’t lived there long,’ Joy urged. ‘And we haven’t been poking about for secret doors and chambers. Grandfather never said anything about them in his will!’

‘I never dreamed the abbey had any secret. But this Dick and Della have evidently got hold of it by chance. Now it’s up to us to find it too, and they’ve given us the clue to the Hall entrance, anyway. If you could somehow clear the girls out of the entrance-hall this afternoon, Miss Macey, Joy could have a go at it. If you’d rather not, we’ll have to wait till night. These children will have to come out sooner or later. They can’t stop underground for ever.’

‘Oh, don’t let’s wait till they come out!’ Joy begged. ‘Let’s get in after them, and catch them in the act! It’s much more thrilling!’

Miss Macey laughed. ‘I will send the girls out for a country walk,’ she promised. ‘It is a beautiful day, and we promised them some long walks. They can work at night.’

‘If we’ve scotched the ghosts!’ Joy amended. ‘They won’t work much while “Rule, Britannia’s” haunting them!’

‘Joy, you’ll tell Jen I never for one moment blamed her?’

‘Oh, I’ll apologise!’ Joy laughed. ‘She’s quite sure of you, though. I’ll keep the kiddies to help me explore, shall I? That will please them no end, and perhaps they’ll forgive me. I’ll make that all straight, Joan. Ta-ta! Next time you see me I intend to come via the Underground

Railway—kind of subway, you know! Wonder if I'll find any moving staircases or lifts to help me along! Now mind you keep a good look-out. If Master Dicky-Ghost hears me coming he'll try to do a bunk—oh, I'm sorry, Miss Macey! He'll try to run away, I mean! And then you come in, Joan, old thing, for you've got to catch him when he gets out of the Tube at this end! By-bye!

'Jenny-Wren! Jacky-boy! I apologise! You didn't cut your names on the abbey wall! It was somebody quite different. I'm sorry; I'm always in such a frightful hurry, you know.' Joy had called these two aside, as all the rest joyfully left their classes at Miss Macey's command, and hurried away to dress for the walk, day-girls as well as boarders, for this part of the country was new to most of them, and all were curious to see the village and the woods.

Jen looked doubtfully at the elder girl. 'You'll tell the others, too? They all think we did it.'

Joy laughed. 'Oh, I'm not trying to apologise on the quiet! I'll tell everybody at tea, if you like. Will that do? You want a public apology, evidently.'

'You said it before them all. I want them all to know,' Jen said sturdily, her sense of justice not quite satisfied.

'Right-o, my dear kid! They shall know, the whole jolly lot of them,' Joy had taken no offence. 'Joan never thought it for one single sec. Told me to tell you so. It's only that I'm a silly ass. But look here, you two, we've got a big job on this afternoon. At least, I have, and I thought perhaps you'd like to help. I'm not going exploring in the depths of the earth all by my lonesome. Care to come?'

'Where? How? What?' both small faces were eager and curious.

'Miss Macey can't; she's got an engagement and has to go to town. Ansky must take the girls out, and Miss Bates is giving music lessons. As for Mademoiselle, I wouldn't have her on this stunt for a thousand pounds! I'd heaps rather have you kids. You'll back me up and do what you're told, won't you? I've promised faithfully we'll be awfully frightfully careful.'

'But what's it all about? What are we going to do?' Jack begged eagerly, while Jen laughed, recognising the speech as very Joy-like.

'Explore the secret passage, my dear children. Just as soon as ever we've got the place to ourselves! There! Isn't that a simply gorgeous stunt for us three? And aren't you everlastingly grateful to me for letting you into it?'

'The secret passage?' Jen's eyes were blazing, while Jack simply stared. 'Oh, do you mean that the somebody in the abbey is the same as the ghost here, and that they come by an underground passage?'

'You've got it, Jenny-Wren. We can't find the abbey entrance, with nothing to guide us to it, so we're going to have a shot at this end. See? Oh, by the way, there are two ghosts, and they're called Dick and Della. You've seen 'em once already, Jenny-Wren. Come out on the lawn till the rest have gone, and I'll tell you all Joan's been able to get out of Ann Watson.'

'I've seen them twice,' Jen said, when she heard who the intruders were. 'Once with their mother, and then yesterday, when we met them in the road and they grinned at the rice in our hair.'

'Those two? Well, I'd jolly well like to pay them out for getting us sent early to bed!' Jack nodded fervently.

As soon as the coast was clear, the three, well armed with electric torches, set to work in the big hall. The walls below the paintings were panelled in oak, carved with many designs and many Tudor roses. Under Joy's instruction, the younger girls began systematically tapping

every inch of the carving in search of a hidden spring, pressing the centres of the wooden flowers, and striking sharp blows on any likely spot.

‘Don’t mark the wood!’ Joy directed. ‘Don’t scratch it! Strike it firmly but lightly!’

The first discovery fell to Jen. ‘I say, Joy, I can see through here. Did you know there were holes in it? And there is a passage or something. The wall’s hollow, anyway.’

Joy and Jack ran to look, and she drew back from a tiny round hole, which was so much a part of the pattern that it had never been noticed. ‘Most of them are blocked up,’ Jen explained. ‘But that one’s hollow, and I believe there are more. It isn’t quite dark inside there.’

They could see nothing through so tiny a slit except that one fact, that the darkness beyond was not solid, and that there evidently was a space of some description. Joy shivered. ‘I don’t like the thought of it at all! We often sit here at night when we’re alone. *Anything* may have been staring in at us! You’d see the room quite well if you were in there, of course.’

‘I suppose Dick and Della did see us, at prep. that first night, and then they began tapping to tease us,’ Jen ventured.

‘Awfully mad thing to do! I’m glad we’ve found all this out. I shall have these holes blocked up. Put a tiny chalk mark under it, Jen, and keep looking out for more, both of you. Look at every hole, and if it’s hollow mark it. I’m not going to have peep-holes for ghosts in my house!’

This added to the work of examination, and it was so long before any discovery was made that Joy began to despair of finding what she sought before the school returned. They had found and marked several holes, when Jack gave a squeal of surprise, and then a yell of triumph. Under her pressing fingers, a rose had suddenly given way; a whole panel swung back with a rusty groan, and the way to the abbey lay open before them.

CHAPTER XV

BUNS AND BISCUITS UNDERGROUND

‘Wait a sec!’ Joy hissed, as much excited as the juniors. ‘Go to the dining-room and fill your pockets with biscuits! It’s nearly tea-time, and we may not be back for hours. Bring some for me, and any buns you can find. We’ll have an underground picnic! And—Jen! Bring a couple of walking-sticks and some strong string—rope, if you can find it. You never know what you may need in places like this!’

‘Sounds as if you explored secret passages every day!’ Jen chuckled, as they fled.

They were back in two minutes, sticks in hands, a bag of buns stuffed inside Jen’s tunic and another of biscuits in Jack’s, a coil of stout cord over Jack’s arm. ‘It’s what I use to fasten my box,’ she explained. ‘I’m afraid the biscuits will be all crumbs if we don’t eat them soon, Joy.’

‘Business first, biscuits afterwards! Inside, both of you! I hear somebody coming. We don’t want a crowd just at present.’ She drew the panel close behind them and closed it with a sharp click.

‘Exciting!’ murmured Jack ecstatically, as they found themselves in the dark. ‘Wouldn’t Molly love to be here?’

‘Oh!’ Jen looked quickly at Joy at the sound of the spring. ‘But now we can’t get out! Can you open it from this side?’

‘No, so we’ll have to find another way, that’s all. There’s nothing like burning your boats behind you,’ Joy said calmly. Then she laughed at Jack’s scared face. ‘It’s all right, kid. I’m not quite such an infant as you! I marked the rose that opens the door. We’ve only got to yell through one of these peep-holes, and any one can let us out. It’s the panel right under my great-grandmother. Don’t worry; we won’t be shut in for ever!’

Jack looked relieved. ‘I thought you meant that about burning your boats.’

‘She never does mean what she says,’ Jen remarked. ‘I’m used to it.’

‘You thought I meant it at dinner-time, all the same, Jenny-Wren! You did get the wind up!’ Joy laughed. ‘I told Miss Macey I’d learnt that kind of slang at school, and she didn’t like it! Come on! We may have miles to go. Pass right along the centre of the car, please! Oh, I suppose you two haven’t lived in London!’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ said Jack, completely mystified.

‘No, you wouldn’t. Never mind just now. I’ll go first. Don’t switch on your torches yet, sillies! They’d be seen from the hall; don’t you see? These peep-holes give light enough to see by. If any of the maids saw lights flickering along inside the wall, they would raise a shindy and no mistake!’

Jen laughed and put out her torch hurriedly, and they groped along by the glimmer of light from occasional knotholes in the inner wall. The passage was about two feet wide, and ran the whole length of the hall. The flooring was of stone and smooth and easy for walking. Joy went first, feeling the way with a stick, and they crept along and only spoke in whispers, lest any one should have entered the hall.

Suddenly Joy stopped. ‘Steps!’ she whispered warningly. ‘We’ll risk one torch now. Wait a sec., you two!’

She went first, holding out her torch and feeling her way, then turned and held the light and bade them follow. 'It's a long way down. We'll take it in bits. Here's a door at the bottom. What if it won't open?'

'It must! The ghost comes through!' Jen whispered excitedly.

'True for you, Jenny-Wren! Opens easily. This is the real passage, I guess. Put your lights on and follow me!'

Jack was shaking with suppressed excitement, and Jen chortling with sheer joy, as they obeyed. On and on the passage led them, lower and lower, and then for a long way on the level. Then Joy stopped again. 'Two ways! Which shall we take?'

'Whichever is most likely to take us out. I'm hungry!' said Jack.

'We'll have to follow both, sooner or later, of course,' Jen remarked. 'It doesn't much matter, does it, Joy? We can't possibly know which way the ghost comes.'

'I wonder where the other leads to?' Joy pondered, and they all held their torches high and looked along the two ways for any helpful sign.

'We'd better toss up for it,' Jen suggested.

'You said we'd have an underground picnic!' Jack murmured hungrily.

Joy laughed. 'So I did, and it's past five. Would you really like to eat those buns and biscuits in here?'

'Rather! I'm frightfully hungry!' and Jack began to pull the bag out of her tunic.

'I'm quite sure none of the others have ever had an underground picnic,' Jen said wistfully. 'It would be topping to tell Nesta and Kath to-morrow!'

Joy laughed again. 'Right-o! Let's gorge! You'll have to sit on the ground. Put out your torches; we may want them before we're done. Mine will be quite enough.'

And by the light of a single torch they squatted on the ground and ate buns and scraps of biscuit till all were satisfied.

'The biscuits *were* broken!' Jack remarked, as the last scrap disappeared. 'Biscuits always are!'

'They *were*!' Joy agreed. 'But they're still more broken now! Let's get on! Has any one got a penny? Oh, you two haven't pockets in those tunics! I've got one myself. Here goes! Heads—right hand path! Tails—left!' She tossed the coin, and Jack and Jen pressed close to see the result as she raised her hand.

'Left!' said all three together.

'I always want to go right when there's a choice,' Jack said regretfully. 'It seems so much the—the right thing to do!'

Joy shook her head at her in mock disapproval. 'You must obey the omen! Come on! Left has it!'

'If the ghost comes along, it will find crumbs!' Jen laughed. 'Oh, aren't I thirsty? Aren't buns dry?'

'It's not a new fact you've discovered, Jenny-Wren. Buns *are* dry! But there aren't any teapots down here. I wonder where those two can be hiding?' and Joy frowned as she led the way along the left-hand passage.

'Perhaps they've gone out, and Joan has caught them,' Jen ventured.

'Very likely, I should think. They must be getting peckish. All we can do is to go ahead and see where we get to.'

'And if we should have to come back, we must remember which way we came!' Jen said cautiously.

‘Yes, rather! We can’t spend all night wandering in the depths of the earth. Nor all the rest of our lives, either,’ Joy said dramatically. ‘It will be the turn to the right when we go back, of course, Jen. Hallo! We’re going up! This is distinctly hopeful! We may get somewhere, even if we don’t get the ghosts!’

Before very long her hopes were realised. A glimmer of light showed ahead, a long, thin line like the slit of a door left ajar, not the twinkle of a candle or torch. All three girls raced up the slope, stumbled on the bottom step, recovered, and dashed up and out, and rolled together, panting and dazzled by the sunlight, into a lilac-bush.

Joy was on her feet in an instant. ‘Behind the chapter-house! That old low door! I’m sure Joan never dreamt it could be opened! Shut it carefully, you two, but not tight. I’m going in again, if those children haven’t come out. This is where they hid after chucking the rice at you, of course. Now I must find Joan!’ and she raced away to the garth and across it to the cloisters.

Jack and Jen, at her heels, found her still plying the bewildered Joan with questions.

‘No, nobody’s come out. We don’t know what to think,’ Joan managed to get in a word at last. ‘They’ve been out of sight all day. What have you found, Joy? You are in a state of dust!’

‘No wonder!’ Joy laughed. ‘We’ve had tea in the secret passage! Buns and biscuits underground! We’ve found the door, Joan—both doors! But there are two passages; we’re going back to explore the other one. Come and see the door; it’s behind the chapter-house.’

‘Behind the chapter-house? What, the low stone door? Nobody ever dreamt that could be opened! We’ve often tried!’

‘There must be some secret spring, and those kids must have found it by chance. There’s a secret panel in the big hall, Joan. You poke one particular rose in the middle; it’s just under my great-grandmother’s toe. And there are holes in the carving that Dick and Della must have watched us through. We’ve marked them all, and I’m going to have them blocked up.’

They were hurrying across the garth as she spoke. Joan examined the well-known door with keen interest. ‘I wonder where the spring is! Dick and Della shall tell us how they found it. But you saw no sign of them, Joy?’

‘Not a scrap. But the passage divides; they may be up the other one. We’ll go back and see where it leads, but we’re all dying of thirst. We brought buns and ate them down there, but we hadn’t any drinks. Couldn’t you give us some tea, or at least water?’

‘Yes, of course. Ann shall boil a kettle and give you tea. I’ve had some. We’ve had an awfully dull afternoon—no visitors, no ghosts, no anything! I’ve been planning how to hide those marks on the wall. They aren’t very deep. I think I shall have it all shaved down a little, and then the scratches filled up. It’s been done in other places; there must have been lots of marks all over it when Sir Antony inherited it and had it put in order. But I’m sorry it should be necessary in the chapter-house.’

‘Can we see the place?’ Jen ventured to ask.

‘Yes, come and look. You didn’t think I thought you’d done it, did you, Jenny-Wren?’

‘No, not for a second. I knew you wouldn’t, and I told them all so,’ Jen said fervently.

Half an hour later, much refreshed, the explorers set out again, bent on solving the mystery of the ghosts and the second passage. It did not take them long to reach the dividing of the ways, but then their progress was much slower, as they climbed over the heaps of rubbish which had reminded Della of Grève de la Ville in Sark.

They had fallen into the pool of the underground spring, and were plodding doggedly on, determined to find the exit of the passage, even if they did not run the ghosts to earth, when

Joy stopped short, with a warning hiss. They stood like images, torches lowered and behind them, and all three heard a strange sound in that place—a girl's voice, talking volubly and loudly to keep up her spirits, and a boy whistling.

‘“Rule, Britannia!”’ murmured Joy. ‘He’s got it on the brain! Unless I am very much mistaken, Jenny-Wren and Jacky-boy, our ghosts are coming to meet us!’

CHAPTER XVI

JOAN'S ULTIMATUM

'It can't be much farther now!' Della said cheerfully. 'I'm sure we've come about a thousand miles.'

'Well, you're not going any farther for a minute or two,' and Joy stepped out and barred their way.

'Goodness!' gasped Della, and sat down very suddenly on the ground.

'Hallo! What on earth——?' began Dick, and his torch flashed out upon them. Then, as Joy held hers aloft, he switched his off hastily.

'It's the red-haired girl that guessed your tune!' gasped Della, still sitting on the floor.

'It is!' Joy said calmly. 'We won't ask who you are, for we know all about you.'

'Oh! So Nanny gave us away, did she?'

'She did, absolutely and altogether. You can't blame her for that; you've treated her rottenly. But the game's up, so far as you're concerned. Now where does this passage lead to?'

'How many of you are there?' Dick had spied the younger girls behind. 'Is it the whole school?'

'No, it's the two kids we saw on the green.' Della scrambled to her feet.

'You threw rice at us,' Jen accused her, 'and then laughed at us when it was all in our hair. You didn't look so awfully beautiful yourselves!'

'Silence! You can exchange compliments later,' Joy said peremptorily. 'We needn't waste our torches rowing one another in here. Where does the passage lead to, you two? How far have you been? And were you finding your way back in the dark?'

'Dick's torch is going to give out, and mine's gone already,' Della explained. 'So as we'd been this way three times already, we thought we could manage without a light for some of the way and save it up for the worst bit, where the puddle is, you know.'

'Is it better after this? How much farther does it go?' Joy demanded.

'You've nearly got to the steps. We'd been that far yesterday, but to-day we got right to the top.'

'It's a hefty climb,' Dick added. 'And then there's a rotten door, and we can't open it. We thought we could get out that way, but we can't budge the thing.'

'Lead the way!' Joy commanded. 'Right about face! Oh, I dare say you're tired, but it won't kill you to do a little more. We can't let you go ramping about by yourselves. 'Twouldn't help you, anyway, for Joan's waiting for you on the garth. So go ahead, and just you do as you're told!'

Sulkily, for they were very tired and hungry, Dick and Della led the way to and up the long flight of steps.

'What a long way!' Jen groaned at last. 'Where can we be getting to? We didn't come down as far as this!'

'We must be under the hill behind the abbey,' Della explained wearily.

'There!' Dick stopped at last, and stood aside, pointing rather breathlessly up to a heavy stone slab fitted in the top of the passage.

The younger girls stood aside respectfully to allow Joy to investigate. She flashed her torch about into all the corners, and Della, anxious to hasten matters, said, 'We felt all over it,

and in that corner there's a big ring. It was stuck up with dirt'—Joy's light flashed where she pointed—'but we got it loose, but we can't move the stone. I hung on to the ring, and Dick hung on to me, but it wouldn't budge.'

'We thought perhaps if we had a rope, we might be able to haul it down,' Dick added.

Jack eagerly thrust forward her coil of cord, and Joy reached up and slipped the end through the ring. 'Make a strong knot!' she demanded of Dick. 'Boys can always tie knots. Now haul, all of you together! I'll go last,' and she stepped down. 'You first, Dick. Mind you don't fall down the stair on top of me! Pull when I give the word! One, two, three! Now go!'

A creaking, tearing sound, and the great stone turned slowly on a central bar and stood upright in the opening, and a shower of dirt and twigs fell on their faces. Dick gave a shout of triumph and dashed forward, Della at his heels. But they only ran their heads into the tangle of bramble which had grown thickly over the opening, and fell back, scratched and wrathful.

Joy pushed past them. She had had long experience of the woods and had forced her way through many a thicket. With the help of her stick and the one Jen carried, she made a way through the thinnest part of the tangle, which her skilful eye had discovered at once. Bidding Dick hold the branches out of her way, she drew and twisted herself carefully through the bushes in a manner that compelled reluctant admiration even from him. Then she helped each in turn to follow, carefully leaving him till the last.

Triumphant, they all stood to look around. 'A secret way of escape for any one taking refuge in the abbey, if they were attacked by enemies who would not respect the right of sanctuary,' Joy explained importantly.

'What does that mean? Oh, we are right up on the hill! There's the abbey down below us!' Jen cried eagerly Jack sat down to rest and gaze out over the beech woods and the lower country beyond.

'The abbey had the right to protect—— Oh, you little wretches!' cried Joy, and made a dash for Dick.

He and Della had seized their chance and made a bolt for freedom. Joy sprang after him, while Jen flung herself on Della at her first movement, and clung heavily round her waist. 'You pig—to try to run away like that!' she panted. 'Come and hold her, Jack!'

'I say!' gasped Jack, clinging to Della's ankles as she struggled to free herself. 'Just look at Joy! Talk about running! She'll catch him, too!'

Joy went leaping downhill at a pace quite equal to Dick's. Moreover, she knew these woods as he did not, and sprang lightly where he stumbled over obstacles. A hidden ditch which she would have leapt by instinct brought him down, and once her hand was on his collar he had no chance of escape. She was taller and stronger than he, and she shoved him before her up the hill, telling him what she thought of him.

'It was a jolly dirty trick!' Jen said vehemently. 'You're a pair of rotten bounders, that's what you are! But what could you expect of people who cut their names on a topping old abbey like that? You're not good sports, either one way or t'other!'

'A very just verdict, Jenny-Wren. Now, down you go, both of you! Jack, lead the way with your torch.'

It was a very dejected pair of ghosts that toiled wearily down the long flight of steps and along the mile of difficult passage, their captors in the rear, and, as they were informed more than once, 'Joan waiting for them on the cloister garth!' When at last they all reached the lilac-bush and the waning daylight safely, Dick and Della were almost too tired to protest against any sentence she might pronounce.

Joan looked them over grimly, as they stood crest-fallen before her, all the defiance gone out of them. They had realised by this time that the dreaded Miss Joan was only a schoolgirl, and had been reassuring themselves on the way with the thought that she ‘couldn’t do much, anyway.’ But this schoolgirl was so very stern and determined, and looked so pitiless when she remembered the defacing of her loved chapter-house, that both quailed before her, and wondered uneasily what their punishment would be.

Joan had thought long and hard as she waited for them all afternoon, and her mind was made up. She had had a few words with Miss Macey, who, returning from her appointment, had been informed that Joy, Jen, and Jack were all missing, and had come to Joan to be assured that all was well. She had given her consent to Joan’s plans for the future, and Joan’s mind was made up, and, as Joy sometimes said, ‘When that’s so, that’s all there is about it! You might as well argue with the abbey. She knows what she means to do; and that’s that!’

Glancing at her cousin’s face now, she saw that her decision was made and that no pleading nor argument would move her. Joan looked the culprits over severely. ‘I’m not going to waste time talking about what you’ve done. You’re going to feel the results of that now. I can see you’re both tired and probably hungry. You haven’t had any tea? Well, that’s your own fault. But the sooner you go home and get it the better. The only question is, what we are to do with you now? Things can’t go on as they are. I dare say I could make you promise not to come into the abbey again, and Ann might promise not to let you in. But I don’t trust your promises, and she’s soft where you’re concerned. Promises are no good either with you or her. I’ve thought it over, and it comes to this—I’m not going to have you two living in the village and doing just as you like, so long as she’s the caretaker here. I don’t trust you. I’ve either got to get rid of you or her. You say your parents have started for South Africa?’

‘Sailed to-day,’ Dick said defiantly, staring at her blankly. ‘What are you going to do? You can’t turn us out!’

‘They *said* we were to stay here!’ Della wailed indignantly.

Jen and Jack, squatting on the grass, watched the court-martial with keen interest. Joy, leaning over Joan’s chair, eyed the criminals and wondered what was coming next.

‘Haven’t you any relations who could take you in, even if it was very inconvenient? I’m quite prepared to write and explain why it is necessary.’

Dick’s face fell. He had no wish to be thrust in disgrace on unwilling uncles and aunts. ‘They can’t. It’s quite impossible,’ he said hastily. ‘They’re ill. Mother didn’t want us to go to them.’

‘They can’t all be ill at once.’ Joan was watching him closely, and knew she had found a point of vantage.

‘They are, then. They’ve all got influenza, and mother thought we’d catch it too.’

‘I can easily get their names from Ann Watson,’ Joan said, ignoring his statement, which she did not believe. ‘Oh, she’ll tell me! You needn’t look at one another like that! I know what you’re thinking, but Mrs Watson doesn’t want to lose a good job if she can help it, and you haven’t treated her so awfully well. She’ll tell me if I ask her; you’ve only got yourselves to blame for that. You’ve got her into trouble and behaved very badly indeed towards her. I shall write to your relations, then—unless you prefer a plan I’ll propose to you now.’

‘Mother wanted us to be in the country for the summer, not in London!’ Della panted indignantly.

‘And I’m quite sure she didn’t want you sent back to your people like naughty babies who can’t be trusted—even if that’s the case,’ Joan said calmly, and their eyes fell before hers.

‘There’s just one way to avoid being sent back to London,’ she went on, and they all eyed her, Dick and Della hopefully, Jack and Jen and Joy curiously. ‘I’ve spoken to Miss Macey, and she’s willing that you should come and live at the Hall, where she and her mistresses and I can all keep an eye on you.’

‘Good gracious alive!’ jerked Jen. ‘What a woolly-wuzzy time we’ll have!’

‘I say, Joan! We don’t want them!’ Joy expostulated.

‘Mother and father don’t want us to go to boarding-school!’ Della cried swiftly.

‘I couldn’t go, anyway!’ Dick’s tone was full of horror.

‘Of course we don’t want them. Neither does Miss Macey. But then neither does anybody. I’m quite sure their aunts and uncles don’t! And Ann Watson doesn’t. But we’ve got to do something with them. I won’t have them left to go ramping all over the country here. They can go and ramp somewhere else, if they prefer it, or they can come into the school and be looked after. They can choose which they’ll have, but there’s going to be no more nonsense,’ Joan said stonily. ‘It isn’t like ordinary school,’ she added to Della. ‘It’s a beautiful house, and a great chance for you to be allowed to live in it for a month or two.’

Joy groaned. ‘My poor house! I shall engage a team of tame policemen, and keep one on guard in every room!’

‘It won’t be for very long,’ Joan went on. ‘At least, I’m sure I hope not! And it will do you lots of good to have some work to do. Your brains are all right, but if they haven’t anything to keep them busy there’s likely to be trouble. As for you,’ to Dick, ‘I don’t see why you can’t. Anyway, since Miss Macey’s willing, you’re going to. It’s awfully good of her to be willing to put up with you, but she and the others will keep you in order all right. If you’d rather go back to your folks in town, I’ll write to them.’

Dick quailed before her stern eyes. ‘You are a rotten bully!’ he growled.

‘Very likely.’ Joan did not seem perturbed at the thought. ‘But I’m responsible for these ruins. They are only mine so long as I keep them in perfect condition. Also, I’m frightfully keen on every stone in the place. I’d far rather you had scratched me across the face than any wall in the abbey.’

‘Look here!’ Dick began desperately. ‘I’m frightfully sorry, and all that. I didn’t mean to do any harm, but I’d got a knife and I was waiting for D., and I just didn’t think what I was doing. I never supposed any one would care so much. I’ll never do anything like it again, and I apologise, and all that. And we won’t come in here again without leave. Now can’t you say pax and have done with it? We’ll stop down in the village, or go in the woods, and not worry you any more,’ and he and Della eyed Joan hopefully.

Joy bent over her shoulder to whisper. ‘Don’t you trust them, Joan. They tried to bolt just now; they’re not straight! And there’s an entrance into the abbey away up there in the woods, and they know where it is! We found our way right out on to the hill! Don’t you trust a word they say!’

Joan flashed a quick look of surprise up at her at this news of the unsuspected entrance. Then she said grimly, ‘I won’t. If there’s another way in, that makes it all the more certain they can’t be trusted here. Don’t you see’—impatiently to Dick—‘if I let you two stay in the village, I can’t trust Mrs Watson here as caretaker? She’s too soft to be anywhere near you. If I let you stop, I’ve got to send her away and get quite a different kind of person, who won’t listen to you, however hard you try to get round her. Oh, I’ve heard about your ways of getting in! If it wasn’t for that, I might perhaps have taken your word; but you’re too sneaky altogether. I can’t see that it would be fair to send her away because of you. She’s been very

awkwardly placed; it was hard on her when your mother left you here. Of course Ann was soft, but it was hard on her, all the same. You—even you—wouldn't want her to lose her job on your account, surely?'

Dick shuffled, and looked down, not liking that 'even you!' Della said brokenly, 'I suppose we were unfair to her. I say, let us go home, won't you? We can fix it up to-morrow. We've been four times along that passage to-day, and it's about done me in.'

'It would be much shorter just to go to the Hall,' Joan said quietly. 'That's only five minutes' walk. Miss Macey will let you have some supper at once, I'm sure, and then when you are rested there will still be time to go and fetch your things. Or—better still! I'll send Ann to pack them and bring them up for you, and if anything's forgotten you can fetch it in the morning. I'll stay here in case of late visitors, though the abbey isn't supposed to be open after six. But some one must be in charge. What do you say? Will you come to the Hall? Or shall I go and write to your people?'

Dick stared sulkily at the grass. Della cried wearily, 'We can't, Dick! Think of Uncle Bob if we were shoved on to him like that! And Aunt Edith said she wouldn't have us at any price!'

'Can't say I blame Aunt Edith!' Joy murmured.

'You'd better come with us,' Jen remarked, in sympathy for their predicament. 'It's not bad really. Miss Macey's a jolly old sport, and it's less like school than usual this term, because of not having proper desks and classrooms and things. I'll look after you!' to Della.

'I'm game!' she said wearily. 'But we've got to go together,' and she looked anxiously at her brother. 'It's heaps better than being in London all summer, Dicky, old bean!'

'Guess we'll have to try it,' he growled ungraciously. 'If it's rotten we can always clear out and get away back to town. Or make Miss Thingummy so jolly sick of us that she'll be glad to get rid of us!'

'We won't hesitate to send you to your people in town if you try that,' Joan said grimly. 'And we shan't send you to them without explaining just exactly why we've had the cheek to interfere with your mother's plans for you. Of course, if that's what you want——'

It was emphatically what Dick did not want. He had lively recollections of previous scenes with Uncle Bob, and knew just what kind of welcome would await him at Aunt Edith's. He stood in sulky silence, digging his heel into the turf.

Joan said sharply, 'Don't do that! You're kicking it into a hole!'

'Oh, goodness me!' groaned Della, thoroughly unnerved by this time. 'She's quite mad about this old place! I wonder she lets any one look at it! Come on, Dicky, old thing! Let's go anywhere they want, so long as we get out of it safely! I'm fed up with old abbeys!'

'I'm fed up with silly children!' Joan said tersely. 'Very well! Right about face, all of you! Lead the way, Jack and Jen. Joy, you'd better see them safely into Miss Macey's own hands. They'll bolt if you take your eyes off them. I'll send Ann to fetch their things,' and she knelt and carefully replaced the turf which Dick had kicked up, while Della watched her with wondering eyes.

CHAPTER XVII

DELLA TELLS THE SECRET

That evening was a thrilling one for Jen and Jack. Cleared of all suspicion by a laughing public apology from Joy, who produced the real culprits, very sulky and shamefaced, as additional proof, they had the privilege of introducing Della to the school and telling the whole story to an admiring audience. Joy conducted small parties a short distance along the secret passage, showed the holes in the panelling and the door to the abbey path, and promised when there was time to allow the whole school, day-girls as well as boarders, to make the journey all the way to the abbey entrance and the upper door. Nothing less would have satisfied the girls, and Miss Macey agreed that it would be better to have no more mysteries.

As soon as their baggage arrived from the village, Della and Dick were ordered off to bed. A small room had been assigned to him on the top story, but for Della another small bed had been put in Jen's room, on her urgent pleading.

'I felt rotten my first night. I don't believe she will, you know, but she might, if she was all alone,' she had begged of Joy.

Joan and Joy went to sit with Mrs Shirley and Miss Macey when the juniors had been sent off to bed. 'We ought to work, of course, after losing all afternoon and evening, but somehow I don't feel like it,' Joan admitted. 'I thought of coming home by Underground, as Joy calls it, but then I thought the panel door at this end might be shut, and it would be so ignominious to have to call for help through a hole in the wall! Hallo!'

A tap on the door, and Jen stood there, still in her dusty tunic, without even her plaits unloosed for bed. 'Please, Miss Macey——'

'Jen, my dear! I told you to go to bed at once! That was twenty minutes ago!'

'Yes, but we've been talking, telling Della things, and—please, she told me something I think Joan ought to know.'

Joan looked eagerly at Miss Macey, who said quietly, 'Tell Joan, then. Is it something private?'

'Not from any of you, I think. I wouldn't tell her before all the girls. Joan, she's awfully sorry they damaged the abbey. She'd never thought any one would care. We've been telling her why you care so much, and she keeps on saying how sorry she is. And she says she never meant to tell you this, and Dick will be mad with her, but she'd like you to know, because if there's really anything in it, it might help to make up for what they did. She says all along Dick's had it in his head that they might find some kind of secret treasure-chamber, where the old monks might have buried their best things when they were afraid they were going to be taken away. He was sure if there was one it would be somewhere on that long passage up into the woods, so that they could come back and get the things easily.'

All four elders were watching her with curious eyes, Joy keenly excited, Joan with dawning eagerness.

'And she says they found a tiny door, a kind of trapdoor in the side of the passage, just about where we met them. We weren't looking for anything of the kind, of course, and we were all thinking about them, and the steps, and the other door, and so we never noticed and walked right past it. But Della says they shoved it open and found quite a big kind of cave under the hill, with heaps of earth lying about. And they poked at the earth, and there *were*

things buried in it. But their torches were going out, and they didn't dare to wait, for fear they'd never get out again. That's all!' She looked round at them all with bright, excited eyes.

Joy was already on her feet. 'Come on, Joan!' she said briefly. 'More Underground for us! Another little trip by Tube!'

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TREASURES OF THE ABBEY

‘I would like to come too,’ Miss Macey said quickly.

‘And I,’ Mrs Shirley agreed promptly.

‘Specially conducted tours by Underground! *I* will lead the way!’ Joy laughed excitedly. ‘Put your outdoor shoes on, aunty, dear! There are some beastly heaps of rubbish to scramble over. Slippers aren’t any good.’

Miss Macey took the hint also, and both ladies hurried away.

Joan looked at Jen’s wistful face, and laughed. ‘Do you want to come too? But you’ve gone to bed, Jenny-Wren!’

‘I haven’t got very far yet. I’ve only just pretended to begin,’ Jen pleaded. ‘I’d simply *love* to come, Joan!—and Jack, too, of course!’

‘Fetch her, then. But not Della. She’s had enough for one day.’

‘And we’ve had enough of Della! Tell her I won’t have her or Dick at any price. We’ll find the door without their help,’ said Joy.

‘But I’ll run up and thank her for telling us about it,’ Joan added.

An excited but very select little party set out by the panel entrance to the passage, as soon as the girls had gathered in the dining-room for supper and the coast was clear. Joy led the way, then Jack and Jen; and Joan followed to give a helping hand to her mother and Miss Macey when necessary.

‘I wonder why they fagged to make a passage between the abbey and the Hall?’ Joan pondered.

‘There are two possible explanations, I think,’ Miss Macey had been puzzling over the same question. The girls listened respectfully, and she went on, ‘The passage may have led to an older building, on whose site the Hall probably stands—a castle of some kind, perhaps as old as the abbey itself. It is easy to imagine that in Norman or Plantagenet times, or even the days of the Roses, such a secret way from the castle to the abbey might be very useful. Then, when the Hall was built in Tudor days, the connection with the abbey would be kept as a matter of curiosity. Or perhaps the original builders of the present Hall were Catholics, and in Elizabeth’s reign, and later, found it convenient to have a secret way by which the priest could retire to the woods in case of a surprise visit from the authorities. Many old houses of that period have their priest’s chamber, or priest’s hole, where he could hide if need arose. In this case he simply walked through the passage into the abbey ruins, which were used, I understand, as farm buildings, and either lay hidden there and received all necessaries from his friends in the house and village, or went out through the farm and made his escape, as circumstances suggested to be wise. If matters were very serious, and it was a case of leaving the neighbourhood altogether, he could follow the upper passage and get out into the woods; and among them and the hills behind, which must have been very wild country in those days, he would never be caught. But the passage to the woods probably dates far back beyond his day, to the times of the abbey itself.’

‘Jolly useful, both for priests and monks!’ Joy commented. ‘Thanks awfully, Miss Macey! That’s just what we wanted to know.’

They passed the turning for the abbey, but left its exploration for another time, and continued along the toilsome upper path.

‘Change here for Oxford Circus!’ Joy the irrepressible murmured, as they turned to the right. ‘Moving staircase on the left to the Bakerloo! Up the stairs to the lifts!’

‘What *are* you talking about?’ laughed Jen. ‘Is that more London rubbish?’

‘It is, my dear infant! This way’s much worse, Miss Macey! The real fun begins now. I don’t wonder Della was all tuckered out, or “done in,” as she calls it, by four times of it in one day.’

‘We’ll have done it four times,’ Jack ventured.

‘Yes, but we’re going to discover hidden treasure. She wasn’t. That makes a lot of difference, my dear kid! She was going to meet her doom,’ Joy said dramatically, ‘and she knew she deserved it should be a whopping. I guess she’d got a vision of Joan sitting there on the garth, looking like an avenging angel, and waiting for her. She had on the way home, anyway; we took good care of that!’

Joan laughed. ‘It didn’t hurt her. What a horror this path is!’

‘Oh, it’s a perfect beast! Gets worse as it goes along, too,’ Joy said cheerfully. ‘Lots more climbing yet, aunty dear! And there’s a brute of a puddle somewhere that you have to tumble into; that’s part of the fun.’

‘Mrs Shirley doesn’t want to tumble into it, and I don’t expect Miss Macey does, either,’ Jen said eagerly. ‘Couldn’t Jack and I go first and scout? We won’t go too far; we know you and Joan want to be the ones to find the secret hoard!’

Joy’s laugh rang out, echoing along the passage. ‘Jenny-Wren, I always said you saw farther than most! Right as usual! We do want to find it for ourselves! But scout for the puddle, by all means!’

‘We’ll yell when we come to it, and then we’ll let you go first again,’ Jen promised, and kept her word to the letter. For she fell into the puddle in an unwary moment, and her shriek of surprise gave warning to the rest.

‘We must be nearly there now,’ Joy said, when the ladies had been helped across the pool. ‘We must search every inch of the wall.’

In a very few minutes her shout announced the discovery, and all the torches flashed upon the low door in the right-hand wall.

Jack sprang forward, then stopped, held back by Jen’s arm.

Joy nodded briefly, as she went forward with Joan. ‘You’ll come next, kiddies. But this is up to us.’

‘Thanks, Jenny-Wren!’ Joan laughed, her eyes bright with excitement.

Together the cousins pushed open the door, which gave way at once under the strong thrust of their shoulders. ‘Wonder it wasn’t locked!’ Joy panted.

‘Della said it was, but the lock was rusty, and they busted it,’ Jen explained, in palpitating excitement. ‘Go on, Joy! Isn’t it thrilling?’

‘Looks as if it had been newly busted!’ Joy laughed. ‘Line clear, Joan! Straight ahead!’

‘Careful, mother! There’s a deep step down here. Don’t slip, Miss Macey!’ said Joan, testing each step carefully with a stick, and turning to give her hand to her mother.

‘We’ll help them! You and Joy go on and look at the buried things, and tell us!’ Jen panted, and planted herself by Miss Macey. ‘Put your hand on my shoulder and jump down, Miss Macey! Jack, you help Mrs Shirley! Oh, Joan, do go *on!*’

Joy had already gone ahead. Joan laughed excitedly and followed. 'If you'll promise there'll be no sprained ankles or broken necks!' she said.

'There *are* things buried in all this earth, Joan!' Joy's excited tone dropped to one of awe. 'What do you suppose they will be? Sacks of coins and jewels?'

'I haven't the least idea what kind of things an abbey would bury in a secret cellar.' Joan was surveying the piled-up soil which half filled the floor of the low chamber.

'Oh, it might not only be the monks! It might be used by the knights and ladies of the castle.' Joy was poking about gently in the loose earth with her stick, her torch in her left hand. 'Here's something! You fish it out, Joan. It will be yours, anyway. I'll hold the light.'

'I'm not so sure that it will be mine!' Joan remarked, swiftly burrowing in the soil for the object Joy had felt. 'I've heard something about buried treasure belonging to the Crown. You have to give it up.'

'That is so,' Miss Macey agreed, as they all crowded round to watch eagerly. 'But they allow you a percentage of the value. You don't lose it all.'

'Oh, but what a rotten swindle! Won't it be ours?' cried Joy.

'What a downright swizz!' gasped Jen indignantly.

'Need we tell?' Jack ventured. 'Couldn't we keep it dark?'

Joan and Miss Macey laughed together. Then all pressed forward in excitement which did not need Joy's whisper to Jen, 'Aren't you fearfully thrilled, kid?' to express it.

Joan drew out a great bundle, wrapped in sacking, heavy and bulky. Sitting on the ground, she unwrapped the covering, and found inside a strong leather sack. This, cut ruthlessly open with Joy's penknife, proved to be stuffed with straw.

Jen groaned. 'Suppose there's nothing in it after all? Suppose it's only a joke of Dick and Della's? I say! Perhaps they buried things here, just to have a game with us!'

'No, there is something in it. It's carefully packed, that's all. It's something very knobbly, all corners.' Joan's voice shook with excitement. Tossing the straw aside, she drew out a tall ewer of quaint design, tarnished but obviously silver, beautifully ornamented with decorative patterns and set here and there with small jewels. She held it up and looked at Miss Macey. 'Was it used in the old church, and hidden here to save it from that beast, Henry VIII.?''

Miss Macey nodded. 'I think it's likely. It is obviously part of the church plate belonging to the abbey. Not very early work, I think, Joan?' She spoke as to an expert.

'No—late Decorated.' Joan's quick eye had noted the period of the designs at once, and her calm tone of certainty justified Miss Macey's question. 'It couldn't, or shouldn't, be early here, you know. They were Cistercians; they weren't allowed jewels, and gold and silver dishes, and other luxuries, in their early days. But later they began to use them. This is more of the date of the refectory than of the early parts of the abbey—a little before its time. There's more; all that straw wasn't for one silver jug.'

She drew out two big silver dishes to match the jug. 'I wonder if these weren't perhaps used by the abbot himself on great occasions, when they had guests in the refectory? Aren't they lovely? Think what they'll look like cleaned up!'

'Topping!' Joy said warmly.

'They are beautiful!' Mrs Shirley and Miss Macey spoke together.

'They're just all right!' Jen murmured ecstatically. 'Are there any more, Joan?'

A further search revealed several cups and chalices and goblets of curious design. 'That's all in this bundle. Put them over there by the wall—very carefully, you two!' as Jack and Jen

sprang to obey. ‘Don’t let them fall. After lying here for all these years safely, they mustn’t be scratched by us! Now, Joy, give me the torch, and you have a go!’

Joy knelt eagerly and grubbed in the earth. ‘Here’s a huge box!’ she announced. ‘Come and help, kiddies!’

Miss Macey took the torch from Joan, who went to help also, and between them they hauled out an ancient iron-bound chest, whose lock fell to pieces at the first touch.

‘Is this the gold and silver and jewels?’ Joy murmured, and Jack and Jen shivered with delight, and thanked their lucky stars they were not in bed like the rest.

Joan opened the chest and showed more wrappings of stout leather. ‘They were good packers!’ she laughed excitedly, ‘and they cared for their things! This is something flat, like a case, or—or—*books!*’

With a gasp of surprise, she showed an old leather-bound volume. Drawing it out very carefully, she gazed for a moment at the great silver clasps and the gilt-tooled designs which covered the back, then opened it and showed a hand-printed book, in Latin, of course, with wonderfully designed and coloured capitals and borders to every page, and tiny miniature paintings set in the margins. ‘Oh! This is lovely!’ she gasped. ‘I like it better than the silver! I’ve always wished we had the abbey books!’

‘That’s priceless, Joan!’ Miss Macey was nearly as much excited. ‘That’s for the British Museum, or I’m much mistaken!’

‘Do you really think so?’ Joan’s eyes shone. ‘How simply gorgeous! I’d be awfully proud!’

‘I should think you’d feel awfully sick!’ Jen groaned. ‘Fancy having to give it up to anybody! It’s simply rotten! You ought to keep it in a glass case at the Hall!’

‘Are there more, Joan? And what books are they?’ Mrs Shirley asked.

‘This is prayers, I think.’ Joan dived into the chest, and drew out another book, bound this time in crimson velvet, embroidered with gold thread and tiny seed pearls. ‘Oh, isn’t this beautiful? I think it’s a Psalter. Just look at these letters! How lovely the deep blue is on the gold background!’ and she held the book up eagerly for them to see the beautiful initials. ‘Oh, we must get them home and see them properly!’

‘Let’s see what else there is first, though!’ Jack cried anxiously.

Joy laughed. ‘Keep cool, infant! Don’t worry! We weren’t born yesterday. Is there anything in the box besides books, Joan?’

‘It’s rather sad, I think.’ Joan was feeling cautiously in the box. ‘Yes, there is something. I’ll get it out in a moment. Can’t you just imagine it, though? The abbot decides to bury the church plate, because he’s heard what has happened at other abbeys. And some old monk comes along with his precious books, that he’s worked at for years, and that he cares about far more than anything else in the world, and begs that they may be buried too. And they lie here for nearly four hundred years, and then are found by kids like us!’

‘Oh, never mind about all that! You can make up stories about it afterwards!’ Joy said impatiently. ‘What have you got there?’

‘It wouldn’t come loose. Here it is now,’ and Joan showed a small leather bag.

Opening it carefully, she drew out and held up a long string of gold beads, set with jewels, which flashed in the torchlight. Hanging from the chain was a silver crucifix.

‘A rosary! The abbot’s, perhaps; but more likely it belonged to some great lady,’ Miss Macey remarked. ‘That is another great treasure, Joan!’

‘I’d far rather find things like these than any amount of money!’ Joan sighed happily. ‘Miss Macey, don’t you think we’d be allowed to keep them for exhibition here, in the abbey? We could have them in cases in the refectory. They ought to be where they belong!’

‘That may be possible, and it would certainly seem more suitable—some of them, anyway. Perhaps you could spare specimens for the Museum. They are certainly worthy of a place in London,’ Miss Macey remarked. ‘I think they are all treasures from the abbey, not from any castle. They seem more like the property of the monks, so far as we have seen.’

‘Perhaps the castle had another hidie-hole, nearer home,’ Jen suggested eagerly.

Joy laughed. ‘We can hardly expect two finds like this. Shall we search some more, Joan?’

Further exploration of the heaps of loose soil revealed several more pieces of silver plate, a number of beautiful candlesticks, some of brass and some of silver, and some golden dishes, which Joan, shaking her head over the declension of her monks from their strict Cistercian rule, was sure had been used in the church in the celebration of Mass. Then a great roll of illuminated manuscripts came to light, as carefully packed and as well preserved as all the other treasures, and Joan’s delight knew no bounds.

‘I really think that’s all,’ Joy said at last. ‘They make a topping show, don’t they? Della’s a jolly old sport! I shall jolly well thank her to-morrow.’

‘How are we going to get them all home?’ Mrs Shirley wondered.

‘Some of us must go and send back the gardeners with big baskets,’ Miss Macey said at once.

‘But somebody must stay with these things,’ Joan added. ‘We’re too near that upper door; just along and up the steps, Joy? I’d like to explore it, but I think it can wait till to-morrow. I’ll stay, if Joy will go and fetch help. You won’t be too tired, “Traveller’s Joy”? But you’re never tired!’

‘I’m too excited to be tired!’ Joy laughed. ‘Is any one else coming? Aunt?’

‘Yes, I’ll come. And surely Jen and Jack ought to go to bed?’

‘Oh, Mrs Shirley! We want to stop with Joan! She must have company!’

‘Nonsense!’ Miss Macey said firmly. ‘I shall stop with Joan. You children should have been in bed hours ago. Do you know it’s ten o’clock? Hurry now! But don’t hurt yourselves in that passage!’

‘Never mind, kids. Think what a jolly lot you’ve had that the others haven’t!’ Joy said consolingly. ‘You may tell them all about it in the morning. It’s not a secret. Think of the topping time you’ll have! Come on, and don’t grouse about it!’

Very reluctantly the younger girls departed, soothed somewhat, however, by the thought of their own importance in the morning, and Joan and Miss Macey made themselves comfortable seats of straw and sacking on the loose earth, and sat examining and exclaiming over the beautiful colouring and designs of the books and manuscripts, which were more precious than jewels in their eyes.

Joan summed up the whole matter at last. ‘Those two, Della and Dick, are awful little wretches, of course, and they’ve given us a worrying time already and may give us more yet; I shouldn’t wonder at that at all! But if they hadn’t been here, we should never have found these gorgeous dishes and glorious books. Think of me living here all these years and never dreaming of their existence! It’s been worth all the worry we’ve had, or all we’re likely to have. If you don’t mind, Miss Macey? It’s awfully good of you!’

‘I think I can cope with Della, and even with Dick!’ Miss Macey laughed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ADOPTED DAUGHTER

Joan and Joy were late next morning, as was not unnatural after the excitements of the day and night. Finding themselves hopelessly in arrears for the school breakfast, they decided that 'it would be nice of us to keep aunty company for once,' as Joy remarked, and so retreated to Mrs Shirley's boudoir and clamoured for a private meal there.

'I'm sure she's often lonely!' Joy added.

'How extremely thoughtful you are, all of a sudden!' Joan laughed. 'Have you been finding treasures in your sleep all night?'

'Rather! I'd just dug up pots of money when I woke up. And jewels! Coo-oo!'

'Hard lines! I didn't dream—even of burglars; I quite expected to! It's an awful feeling to have all those lovely things lying about.'

'Awful? A tophole feeling, I should say!'

They found the big hall unusually quiet when they went down again presently, and so were the other classrooms and the garden. 'Your Majesty's loyal subjects seem to have done a bunk,' Joy remarked. 'Where have they all got to?'

'Wherever Miss Macey has put our buried treasure, I guess. I expect it's all in her study. She'd feel it would be safest there.'

'Hi, you kid! Oh, it's Jacky-boy! Where is everybody, Jack?'

'In Miss Macey's room, looking at pots and cups and saying, "How tophole! Oh, how lovely! What gorgeous things!" I'll call Jen; we want to speak to you,' and Jack fled away.

The Queens laughed. 'What are we wanted for now? It's generally to soothe up somebody, but those two can't have had a bust-up, surely,' Joy wondered.

'Jacky-boy and Jenny-Wren? No, they're twin souls. They won't have quarrelled. It must be something else.'

The two presented themselves before the seniors, with serious faces.

'Well, Jenny-Wren, have you had a priceless time telling *everybody all* about it?' Joy teased.

'It has been rather perfect,' Jen admitted. 'I shouldn't have thought anybody could ask so many questions. We seem to have told it all hundreds of times already.'

'Glad I slept through it!' Joy laughed.

'And what did you want with us, Jen?' Joan asked curiously.

'Well, you know Jack and I are married?'

'I'd heard of it, though I wasn't present at the ceremony,' Joan laughed.

'Oh, there wasn't one. We just made up our minds.'

'Most improper!' Joy said solemnly. 'D'you mean to say you didn't even have witnesses? I'm disappointed in you, Jenny-Wren. I did think you'd do the thing properly.'

'We could do it over again,' Jack ventured. 'I mean, we could do it now.'

'Oh, no! It's far too late!' Jen's eyes danced. 'You see, we've got a family. That's what we came to tell you, Joan. Because you're the Queen, and we think you'll want to understand things.'

Joan's gravely-interested—'Of course I do!' was drowned in Joy's shout—'A family! Then it jolly well *is* too late! But haven't you been rather—er—hurried about it, Mr and Mrs?

Which is Mr and which is Mrs, by the way? I don't even know that yet. And a family! Jenny-Wren, you're too much for me! How many of a family? And where did you get it? Where are you going to keep it? You haven't lost much time, have you?"

Jen laughed with satisfaction; she had been counting on the effect her announcement would produce. "Oh, only one so far! We think one will be enough to start with, especially as she's rather old. We've decided to adopt Della, and bring her up properly. She doesn't know the first thing about how to behave in a school, and she's rather scared, and she sleeps with us, so we thought we ought to give her a leg-up. Don't you think we ought to?" she appealed to Joan.

"It's a jolly fine idea," Joan said warmly "I'm sure you two can help her a lot. Is she willing to be adopted, by the way? I suppose you've broken the news to her?"

"The scaredness will wear off, you know," Joy warned them. "It won't last. It's only because things are all new."

"And because she hasn't got Dick to back her up," Jen said shrewdly. "They've always done everything together, just like twins, and now that he's chucked her she feels kind of lost."

"I should think she would. But why has he "chucked her," as you so beautifully express it? Your English is really deplorable, my dear Jen! We shall have you corrupting the whole school if you talk in this slipshod manner," Joy said solemnly, with an excellent imitation of Miss Macey's tone. "Why, even *I* shall be learning slang if I talk much to you!"

The married couple giggled at a rebuke coming from such a quarter. Joan said laughing, "Shut up, silly! Tell us about Dick, Jen?"

"Even Her Majesty's catching it! "Shut up!" Dear, dear! This is very sad!" Joy said mournfully.

"Dick's mad with Della because she told you about the secret hiding-place," Jen explained. "And he's mad because he's here at all; and he's mad with you for finding the treasures. But he's maddest of all with her."

"Poor chap! He must be in a very bad state!" Joy laughed. "Both bad and mad! It's sad, isn't it?"

"It's rough on him, all the same. I can quite believe he's feeling sore," Joan remarked. "And so Della was lonely, and you decided to adopt her, you two? That was decent of you. It's always awkward for two to take in a third."

"It isn't as jolly as just two, of course, and we think she may be rather a worry," Jen acknowledged. "But we thought we ought to, Joan."

Joan nodded, pleased with the readiness with which they had seen and accepted the responsibility thrust upon them.

"I hope she won't lead you an awful life. I guess she can be a terror when she likes," Joy suggested gloomily.

"What does she say about it?" Joan asked.

"Oh, she's pleased! She's so cut up about Dick that she's glad of anything or anybody!"

"H'm! Doesn't sound awfully grateful," was Joy's comment.

"You mean," Jack amended, "that she's so mad with Dick that she's glad of any new plan just to spite him."

"A rather different way to put it!" Joan laughed.

"She made it sound like that," Jen admitted, "but it's really that she feels so bad, Joan."

Joan nodded. "I expect she does feel bad inside. But Dick will get over it, you know, and then he'll want her back."

'She calls Jen Mummy, and me Pa,' Jack remarked.

'Good for Della! But I thought perhaps Jen was Mr? She generally—*gen-erally*—please applaud, somebody!'

'Oh, we didn't miss it!' Joan laughed. 'Is it your first pun? You seem rather pleased with it!'

'Jen *usually* seems to take the lead,' Joy said solemnly, 'so I thought perhaps she was the father of the family?'

'Oh, but the mother often has to boss!' Jen explained, with dancing eyes. 'Oh, no, I'm Mummy!'

'But suppose Dick gets over it, and Della wants to chum with him again?' Joan asked. 'They will, you know. They won't quarrel for long. What are you going to do then? If she goes on with him as they did before, you'll have a lively time, I'm afraid.'

'Or shall you adopt Dicky, too?' Joy mocked. 'You could quite well have twins, Jenny-Wren!'

'Not if one of them's Dick! No, we aren't going to take that on,' Jen said definitely. 'Della'll have to choose, that's all. I suppose you can always get rid of an adopted child, can't you?'

'Well, you're not supposed to,' Joan laughed. 'You're supposed to look after her till she's grown up and able to take care of herself.'

'But if Della gets too much for you, I advise you to follow Dick's example and "chuck her" too, Jenny-Wren,' said Joy. 'Don't let her blight your whole career. She's not worth it.'

'Oh, there's something else we've decided!' Jen added. 'You know about the cricket and dancing?'

'I know it's been very much on your mind, and you want to do both, and you can't,' Joan laughed. 'Have you settled it at last?'

'We've decided it's quite proper for the father and mother of a family to do different things; they always do, anyway. So Jack's going in for cricket, and I'm going to join your club.'

'Much obliged, I'm sure!' Joy teased. 'Now we shall be quite all right!'

'I'm very glad, Jen. Of course, it doesn't mean that you must never play cricket, you know! But you mustn't be in the team, or expect to play in matches; there's no harm in your having a game now and then; just as we allow outsiders in to watch our dances. We don't try to shut the rest of the school out. Not nowadays!' Joan laughed. 'They did once, but that's all ancient history; it was before we went to school. But you must only try to do one or the other in earnest, you know. And what is Della going to do?'

'She's keen on cricket, too. That's what makes it quite all right for me to go in for the dancing,' Jen explained. 'Jack will have Della for company, and she won't feel so much that I'm—well——'

'Deserting her! I see. It's all arranged, then, and everybody's pleased. You'll be glad you practised before the school came. We're going to dance in the hall one evening soon, or out on the lawn.'

'You see, if we do different things, we can talk about them both at night; families always do,' Jen said seriously. 'It's much more thrilling than all being keen on only one thing. That would soon get awfully stale!'

'Daddy talks about town, and his business, and the city; and Mummy about the shopping, and the cooking, and the babies, and the servants,' Joy added. 'Right-o! May I have the

pleasure of a dance, Mrs—er—Wren, I presume? I'll have to be man, of course. You shall have the honour of dancing once with me as soon as Her Majesty gets the evening fixed up. I shouldn't wonder if it was this very night!

'Oh, may I? Will you? I wouldn't have dared to ask you!' Jen was fully sensible of the honour conferred on her. 'I'm sure all the girls want you!'

'I'm in great demand!' Joy assented mockingly. 'But I'll reserve one for you. I think it shall be "We Won't Go Home Till Morning"; you're just the right size to be turned under my arm.'

'It sounds rather awful,' Jack ventured. 'What are you going to do to her under your arm?'

Joy's laugh rang out. 'That's right, Jacky-boy! You look after your "woman"! This!'—and she caught Joan's right hand, led her solemnly down the hall for six steps, turned her to the left under her raised right arm, and they skipped back with crossed hands, Joan laughing. 'That's how you do it,' Joy explained. 'I'll dance you down the room and up again, Jenny-Wren!'

'But I don't know it,' Jen said doubtfully.

Joy laughed again. 'You will know it, my dear kid! Don't worry! What will you dance with Joan? Didn't you know? Oh, you'll have to! The Queen always opens the dance with the newest member! If there are several, she takes them in turns. Sometimes it takes her the whole evening to get through them.'

'What a topping idea! But I'll be shy,' Jen laughed.

'We'll start with the "Mary and Dorothy." That's the easiest thing you ever saw, Jen,' Joan remarked.

'And she'll turn you under, too—oh, no! I forgot! She won't,' Joy laughed, as Joan looked at her quickly. 'You just change hands in "Mary and Dorothy." It's as easy as anything, Jen.'

'There's Dick,' said Joan, glancing through the window. 'How sulky he looks!'

'Not half!' Joy assented. 'I suppose he was frantically mad with Della for putting us on to that secret hoard?'

'He found the girls all buzzing round the cups and goblets and things when he came down,' Jen explained. 'So he asked Della if she'd told you——'

'*Asked?*' cried Jack. 'He just yelled at her!'

'You don't do justice to the situation, evidently, Jenny-Wren!' Joy remarked. 'Well?'

'She said she had, and tried to get behind Jen,' Jack continued dramatically. 'She evidently thought behind Mummy was the safest place! So he said, "I'll never tell you another secret as long as I live, Della Jessop!" and she said, "You haven't any more to tell, old bean!" and he said, "That's all you jolly well know about it! I'll find somebody that can keep his mouth shut next time, and it won't be a sloppy kid of a girl, either!" and then he stalked away in a temper.'

'Tut, tut! Miss Macey won't approve of Richard's language, I'm afraid!' Joy's tone was pained. 'We shall all find our beautiful manners deteriorating if we associate much with the gentleman. Of course, he had some excuse for feeling mad. But "Sloppy kid of a girl" is *not* a nice expression—nor tactful, considering where Master Dicky said it!'

'He hasn't any more secrets about him, I suppose?' Joan asked. 'What did Della say about that?'

'She's quite sure he hasn't and he only said it to rile her. She says he always told her everything.'

‘Well, if you hear any more hints of secrets, you come to us at once. I’m on for all the secrets he can find!’ said Joy, and Jack and Jen promised readily.

CHAPTER XX

DICK'S SECRET

During the afternoon a crowd of day-girls and boarders set out under Joy's guidance to make the 'Grand Tour of the Underground,' as she said. The whole school wanted to go, of course, so were divided into several parties, which Joan and Joy promised to lead alternately. The exploration seemed likely to take so long that Miss Macey laughingly granted a second afternoon's freedom from classes. 'It's much against my will and principles,' she assured the senior girls. 'But I must expect to pay somehow, I suppose, for bringing you to such a mysterious dwelling! Secret passages and underground treasure-chambers are not everyday happenings with any of us! So you may take another holiday and explore them all as thoroughly as Joan and Joy are willing. Then there will be no more mysteries and you can all settle down to work in earnest.' And even the matric candidates, whose time was precious now, thanked her excitedly and hurried away at the time appointed by Joan for their own 'select conducted tour.'

The excited junior party, with Nesta, Molly, and Kath following closely on Jack and Jen and Della, had to be allowed to go first, of course, or there would have been no peace for anybody. Following them went Dick, alone and sulky still. Della had not spoken to him since his first angry outburst in the morning, though her eyes had followed him wistfully at times; at other times she seemed devoted to her newly-adopted parents and ignored his existence. She was on in front, talking eagerly with Jack and Jen and their companions, telling of her first visit to the tunnel, and describing how she had crept after Dick up the stone stair into the passage in the wall of the big hall, how the sound of voices had warned them of the presence of the girls, and how she and Dick had peered through the knot-holes in the panelling, watching and listening, till a sudden temptation had set him to tapping 'Rule, Britannia!' 'I told him what I thought of him, as soon as I'd got him down the steps! It was a mad thing to do! He said nobody would know what it was, and they'd think it was ghosts. But that girl Joy's too smart. She was on to him as soon as he started it next day.'

'Oh, Joy's the limit when it's anything to do with music!' Nesta agreed. 'She's going to be a famous composer some day. Everybody says so.'

'I wished he wouldn't do it,' Della added, 'but I couldn't stop him. I used to be able to keep him in order, but he's getting beyond me. Mother said just the same! And as for Nanny!'

'There's nothing for it but boarding-school when they get to that stage,' Jen said maternally.

'Is that why they sent you here?' Della flashed at her.

Jen smothered a laugh. 'Goodness me, no! They're all pining away with loneliness without me. But we live right among the moors, and it's too lonely. They wanted me to be with other girls. Oh, I've been kept in order! I've got big brothers, not little ones!' she laughed.

'Dick would be easier if he was either bigger or littler,' Della grumbled. 'He might as well be a twin as only one year younger! He thinks he's as good as me already.'

'As good? Oh, you mean big! I shouldn't have said "good" for either of you two!' Kathy laughed.

‘He’ll jolly well think he’s bigger than you before long,’ Jen prophesied. ‘You won’t be able to sit on him much longer!’

‘Boys are a nuisance, aren’t they, Jen?’ Jack spoke with the air of an experienced family man. ‘I’m jolly glad we’ve only got a girl to look after!’

‘What do *you* want here?’ Joy demanded, at sight of Dick following her party. ‘You’ve seen all this quite two or three times before!’

‘It won’t hurt it for me to see it again, will it?’ Dick was feeling very sore to-day, and his tone to everybody was resentful. To Joy it was almost rude, for was it not she who had betrayed his tune? As for Joan, he would not look at her since Della’s betrayal had given all the treasures into her hands.

‘I’m not so sure,’ Joy retorted. ‘You seem able to do a good deal of damage wherever you are. I don’t know that I’ll have you along with me; I’d rather see you in the distance.’

‘Joy, do come on! Oh, don’t bother about him!’ urged Molly Gilks eagerly, and the rest of the juniors, crowding round the panel door, took up the cry.

Joy gave way and promptly forgot all about Dick, who followed, intent on doing a little private investigation on his own account. Something he had seen on a previous journey underground remained persistently in his mind; he had put it aside at the time, for further inquiry later, but the exposure of all the secrets had put an end to his hopes and plans. He realised that it would be very difficult to get into the abbey and its passages now; there were ways in which he might manage it, but they would require care and might be dangerous. His present business was to find out if his suspicions seemed likely to justify the risk. On such an occasion as this, if he went with the rest of the school, the tunnels would be open to him; but to go alone meant to go in secret, and that would be very difficult now.

So while the younger girls crowded up the steps to the door behind the lilac-bush, with laughing warnings from Jack and Jen not to fall over the edge and get squashed between the stair and the wall, Dick hung back and was forgotten in the darkness. When they had all pushed their way out into the sunshine and were gathered in the chapter-house, exclaiming over the ugly J E which had caused so much trouble, Dick, his torch switched on for its last remaining flicker, spent a few busy but very profitable moments alone in the passage. He had been up and down those steps a great many more times than Joy or Jen or Jack; and he had been there when it had been necessary to be very careful of his torch, and when therefore he had felt his way up the stair in the dark. Joy had always used her torch to light her way, and had always been in a hurry to reach the top. So she had missed what Dick, in the dark, had seen, or thought he had seen. He had said nothing to Della because he had not been quite sure. His object this afternoon was to satisfy himself, and a very few minutes would be enough. He would know very quickly whether the risky, but extremely fascinating, idea of an attempt at a secret visit would be worth while or not.

Was there, or was there not, a ray of light showing from behind those steps? It was only a faint lighter shade in the blackness of the hollow between stair and wall, and would never be noticed by any one carrying a light. Dick switched off his torch, and running up the stair drew the door at the top close, then waited till his eyes were accustomed to the darkness. Then he peered into the curious niche between the staircase and the wall. Surely as he looked down, all in the dark the day before, and groped his way with his hands, he had seen a light down there?

He saw it again; there was no mistake. It was faint, but definite. Was it only from some crack in the wall, which gave entrance to the outer air and had helped to keep the atmosphere fresher than might have been expected?—a point which had not occurred to the girls. Or was

he, by any chance, on the track of a new discovery? What about the dungeons he had hoped to find? Did ancient abbeys have dungeons? He had no idea, but had a vague feeling that dungeons would have been more suitable under an old castle than under an abbey. What did abbeys have underneath them, then? That was what he was determined to find out now.

No, not now. There would be no time. The girls would be down again in a moment—bother them!—and they must not suspect his secret. He was not going to trust any girl this time. But he would want help. To explore all alone in the depths of the earth would be ‘rather beastly,’ he thought. What about a boy, perhaps?

It was a tight fit, even for Dick, in places. He squeezed between steps and wall, and wormed his way along till he stood below the stair. Here there was more room, however, and he traced the light to its source very quickly—a crack in the masonry of the outer wall, just a chink between two great blocks of stone, and so choked by weeds that only a glimmer of daylight penetrated. It was just enough to show that the darkness was not all dark, and no more.

Dick flung the ray of his torch swiftly all round, then hurriedly extinguished it at sound of voices on the stair. But his eyes were snapping in triumph; that one moment had been enough. He knew he must come here again. There was more to see!

Very quietly he crept back, unheard by the noisy, laughing troop of girls who crowded down the steps, cautioning one another not to slip over the broken edge. ‘If they do, they’ll come bang on my head!’ Dick thought grimly, and crouched in hiding, unnoticed and forgotten, under the stair, lest a ray from a torch should reveal his presence. As the last girl reached the passage and hurried after the rest, he slipped out and joined the crowd.

‘Where’s that boy?’ Joy demanded, as she piloted her party along the passage, and bade them go straight ahead, following Jen and Jack and Della, and turning to the left at the ‘Buns and Biscuits Corner,’ as she called it. ‘I haven’t seen him since we started. Was he in the chapter-house with us? We can’t have him ramping about loose in the abbey! Joan would have a fit.’

‘He’s here,’ said Nesta and Molly, bringing up the rear. ‘Behind us; it’s all right, Joy.’

‘I didn’t see him till this minute, though,’ Kathy added. ‘Where have you been all this time? You weren’t up there with us,’ she demanded of Dick.

‘Waiting for you down here. I wasn’t going to fag all up there. I’ve been often enough,’ he retorted.

‘Yes, you jolly well have! We saw your hideous scribbles on the wall!’ said Molly scathingly.

‘Goodness me!’ cried Nesta. ‘Did you sit here all alone on the bottom step?’

Dick winked cheerfully in the darkness. ‘Sure thing! You get along, or they’ll be all over that treasure-chamber before you get there.’

This thought was too much for the trio of juniors, and they set off after the others, whose laughing shrieks proclaimed that the leaders had fallen into the puddle far up the higher passage. Dick grinned; then he raced after the three and caught them up at the corner. ‘I’m not coming away up there. I’m fed up with this old tunnel. You’d better tell the carrotty girl, or she’ll think I’m wandering about her rotten old abbey. I’m going back; see?’

‘All right, old thing! We don’t want you!’ Kathy retorted.

Dick watched them go ahead to shout the message to Joy, then turned and strolled back to the Hall. The way to the abbey was open to him now, but the abbey had lost its fascination in this new possibility. There was no need to investigate further; he was satisfied, and only

anxious now to carry out the next part of his plans. Besides, his torch was not to be trusted, and he must have a light.

Miss Macey raised no objection when he politely, though still rather resentfully, asked leave to go down to the village to fetch something Ann Watson had forgotten to pack. 'My stamp-album isn't in my box. I must have left it lying about somewhere, and she hasn't noticed it. The red-haired—er—Joan—girl promised we might go if anything was forgotten,' he urged.

'Certainly you may go, since it is a holiday. Has Della discovered anything missing?'

'Haven't heard her say so,' Dick said blandly, and did not explain that he had only once spoken to Della all day, and then in a temper.

He made off at once, after a swift, unauthorised visit to his sister's bedroom. A quick glance round showed him what he had hoped for, her useless torch lying on the table. He slipped it into his pocket, congratulating himself that it had been the one to give out first, as if it had been any use she would certainly have taken it with her on the afternoon's expedition.

His trip to the village took so long that he was late for tea. As the distance was only half a mile, this seemed to require some explanation, but his description of his doings was not very satisfactory. He had 'gone into a shop' in the village, and showed a packet of peppermints in proof of his statement; but with characteristic double-dealing he said nothing of two newly-charged torches in his pocket. He had stayed a long time at the cottage, looking for his stamp-album, but had not found it; either he had forgotten to bring it, after all, or the boy there—Micky Clarke—had taken a fancy to it. Dick could not say for certain he remembered it being brought from London. He said nothing of an hour-long consultation with Micky in the garden, behind the bee-hives; and did not explain that he had had to wait till afternoon school was over to get hold of Micky at all.

Miss Macey could know nothing of all this, and could not be blamed if her suspicions were not aroused. She regretted the loss of the album, of whose existence she had heard with secret relief, for there was always hope that a boy who was interested in stamps would be able to keep himself amused without getting into mischief. She had looked to the stamp-album for help in her difficult task with Dick, and was sorry it was not forthcoming.

But Miss Macey did not hear Della's comments on Dick's afternoon out. 'Where have you been all these hours, old bean?' she asked airily. She ignored the strained state of their relations and hoped he would do the same, for during the day she had had time to miss him. The reaction foretold by Joan was beginning to take place.

To her relief Dick was in such high good humour that he answered quite pleasantly. 'I trotted down to have a chat with old Granny Clarke, and—er—do a few odd jobs in the village. Madam gave me leave to go and look for my stamp-album; Nanny didn't seem to have packed it,' he grinned.

'Your——? Your *what?*' gasped Della, then broke into a giggle of understanding. 'Oh, of course! Your beautiful, gorgeous stamp-album, that Aunt Edith gave you last Christmas! I hope you found it?'

'I didn't, and that's a fact,' and Dick, who had never owned either stamps or album in his life, grinned again. 'Sad, isn't it?'

'What did you really go for, Dicky, old bean?'

'As if I'd tell you!' he retorted. 'After last night! You can jolly well go on asking!' and Della retired, crushed.

‘Oh, by the way, I took your torch to be refilled,’ Dick said casually, as he turned his back on her. ‘I’ll call for it another day. There’s a shop in the village where they’ll do it for you. Mine was giving out too, so I took them both.’

‘Thanks awfully! I wished I had it this afternoon,’ Della said meekly.

Dick grinned wickedly. ‘May take a few days,’ he informed her.

‘Oh, you’d expect that in a village,’ Della agreed, with no idea that her torch, fully charged, lay in his pocket at that moment.

Dick grinned again, and went off in search of his belated tea.

CHAPTER XXI

DICK'S STAMP ALBUM

At tea that evening Queen Joan made an announcement. 'Girls! As we've spent all afternoon exploring, we'll have to stick to our prep. to-night. But we can get in two full hours before seven, and after that Miss Macey says we may have an hour's dance practice. I hope the day-girls will be able to stay; it won't be very late. We'll clear away the tables, and dance in here, as the grass will be too damp by then. Miss Lane isn't coming to play for us to-night; it's only a practice, and just for ourselves. But you can take turns at the piano, and Joy will help. We have the music, and several of you can play. Those who don't dance can either watch or go home, or go to bed early, if they'd rather. They shall have cricket to-morrow afternoon; we've a field that will do, and we're having it mown for you. It isn't like a real cricket-ground, but it's better than nothing. And the tennis court will be marked out too.'

The cricketers cheered, and laughed at the thought of going home or to bed any sooner than they need.

'As if we ever should!' said Molly and Kath together.

'Don't either of you dance, then?' Jen asked. 'I'm not sure yet who's who?'

'I'm Hamlet,' said Nesta. 'I'll dance something with you, Jen. What do you know?'

'Mostly the dances for four; Joan and Joy and Mrs Shirley taught me, before you all came, you see. There's one with a funny name, but I like it; well, they nearly all have funny names! This one's "Hit"—something or other.'

'"Hit and Miss?" Right-o! We'll dance that together,' Nesta promised.

'Do we dress up when it's just a practice? For I haven't anything to dress up in.'

'Come and ask,' said Nesta, and they sought out Edna and Peggy Gilks, keen dancers both of them, to put their question.

They returned in relief with the news that the costume expected would be 'only gyms,' and when prep. was over the girls all appeared in blue tunics and plimsolls. The hall was cleared, the long tables disappearing in a second, the audience perched themselves on these and on the piled-up chairs against the walls, Joy went to the piano, and the dancers fell into two long lines, Joan and Jen at their head, to open the evening with the 'Mary and Dorothy.'

In spite of her confidence in Joan, Jen felt not a little nervous, for it was an ordeal, though of course a great honour, that her first dance must be with the Queen, and must be a dance which she had never even seen. It had been described to her, of course, and she knew the movements, but the description, as given by Joy, seemed almost too simple to be true—'Set with your partner and turn single—eight beats! Ring with the next couple—eight beats! Number Ones—you'll be One, if you're with Joan—lead down the centre, four beats, and back, cast out round the Twos—twelve beats altogether; and there you are, ready to begin again!'

'Are you sure that's all?' Jen had asked doubtfully, dreading some unknown mysteries of heys or stars or arches.

Joy's laugh was reassuring, however. 'Not in this one, Jenny-Wren! This is just a baby dance!'

And in less than two minutes Jen had lost all nervousness, and found herself being carried into the ring and led down the middle by Joan, casting out and facing her again, without the

slightest difficulty. 'Oh, I like this!' she cried softly, as they changed hands and came up the middle together.

'We all do!' Joan laughed, as they parted.

'And what a ducky little tune!' Jen added, as they caught hands for the ring again. 'I like "Mary and Dorothy"! My first dance!'

'It's a dear little tune! Some of the others are finer, and the dances too, but——' they dropped hands and ran round the second couple. 'But this is as pretty as any of them!' Joan finished laughing, as they met in the ring again.

'And we can talk! I thought perhaps it wasn't the thing to talk while you were dancing!'

'Why not? We're only dancing because we like it and want to have a good time. We're not showing off to anybody. Everybody's talking!'

'Yes, they jolly well are!' Jen laughed. 'They'll drown the music in a minute.'

'No, they won't do that. You must hear the music, or you can't dance to it. We're dancing to the music, you know; it's not playing for us—we're dancing to it.'

Jen left her there for the 'cast-off,' and faced her, wide-eyed, as she 'set' opposite to her. 'I didn't know that,' she said, as they joined hands again. 'I thought the music was just played for us.'

'For us to dance to—yes! But the music's the chief thing; you've got to keep time to it, not it to you.'

'I see!' Jen said thoughtfully.

'It's rather talking in spasms, all the same, isn't it?' Joan laughed. 'As a time for conversation, a longways dance can only be called jerky! And of course you don't talk in a morris; it's far too much in earnest. Or if you're doing a brainy country dance, like "Newcastle," it's some time before you can talk much without getting tangled and putting every one else out. But in these little long dances, why not?'

'Little long dances! That's just what it is!' Jen laughed. 'Thanks awfully for dancing with me! We're at the end of the line.'

'So now we have a rest and go up again as Twos. No leading down this time, but all the rest as before.'

'Dick's wandering about like a lost sheep,' said Jen, as Dick lounged to the door of the hall and stood watching, but presently disappeared again, a rather contemptuous look on his face.

'Well, you couldn't expect him to join in!' Joan laughed. 'Perhaps he'll go into the cricket to-morrow. I guess they'd be quite pleased to have him. He hasn't been as much bother as I expected to-day. Now that's enough of "Mary and Dorothy"! and she clapped her hands for the music to stop. 'We'll have "Hey, Boys" next, for we taught you that on the garth. I'll find somebody else to play, and Joy shall take you for her woman. You remember how to "gipsy"? —"Hey, Boys," girls! All who know it form sets of four, and let me see if anybody's left out. Who will play?'

Della was looking serious, if not gloomy, as she watched the dancing, perched precariously on top of a pile of chairs beside Jack, Molly, and Kath. This sort of dancing was new to her, but her interest was not keen enough to conquer her anxieties and rouse her from her gloom. She had begun the day prepared that Dick should show resentment on account of her betrayal of the secret of the treasure-chamber; the impulse which had made her speak out the night before, of compunction towards Joan because Dick had damaged her beloved abbey and caused her real distress, had passed with her overwrought condition, and Della wished

now that she had waited till the morning, when she would certainly not have spoken at all. But the words had been said and could not be withdrawn; the treasures were Joan's, and Dick was deeply offended and had lost all faith in girls, where the keeping of secrets was concerned. Della had quarrelled with him all her life, as a matter of course, but never so seriously as this; and in her first loneliness she had accepted eagerly the generous offer of friendly 'adoption' from her room-mates. But her eyes had followed Dick anxiously all day, and she missed him more and more as the hours passed. Jack and Kathy tried to interest her in talk of cricket and in the dancing, but not even the excitement of watching 'Grimstock,' with its curving lines and winding in and out, and its sudden changes of over and under arches, could rouse her.

'I'll be back in a minute,' she said suddenly, and slid down the pile of chairs, nearly taking them all with her.

'Look out, silly!' shrieked Molly in dismay, as the rows of chairs swayed dangerously for a moment.

'You're all right. I won't spill you,' Della said scornfully, and vanished out into the garden.

'Where's she gone?' Jen came up and climbed cautiously into Della's place. 'They're going to do "Old Mole" now. I asked Joy if I could join in without learning it first, and she laughed and said, "No jolly fear!" And she was jolly well right, too!' she added, as she watched the changing movements intently. 'It's awfully pretty, but you'd have to learn it. Where has Della gone?'

'I hadn't time to ask her. She just went.'

'And nearly took us all with her!' Molly added indignantly.

'Why aren't you in the Hamlet Club?' Jen demanded, turning to her. 'All your sisters and cousins belong—Edna and Peggy and Georgie; the whole family! They're awfully fine dancers too. If you belonged, you could have dances at home together!'

'Oh, we do! Peg taught me years ago, before I came to school. That's why,' Molly explained easily 'I'm fed up with dancing; we have such tons of it at home! But we never get cricket; we haven't a boy among us! So I wanted a change. You see, Georgie and Ed were in the dancing from the very first day; they were in the first six who learnt morris from Cicely Hobart, and taught it to the whole club. Then when Peg went to school, she joined too, because she was chosen as a "bridesmaid," and so she simply had to be in the club. And the three of them taught me, so that they could dance at home. But when I came to school, I wasn't going in for more dancing! Not likely! I wanted a change!'

Jen laughed. 'That's just the same as me, only the other way round. I've always had cricket with the boys, but all this is quite new—and topping! I simply love it, and I love every tune I've heard so far. I wanted a change too.'

'Of course, I like watching, but I didn't want to give up cricket for it,' Molly added.

'I like watching, too, but I like joining in better!' Jen said decisively.

Della easily found Dick in the garden. He was studying intently the old gate which gave entrance to the abbey grounds. It was locked, of course, and the glass-covered wall was impossible to him as it had been to Jack and Jen.

Della slipped her hand through his arm. 'What are you up to now, old thing? Nature study? Don't keep waxy with me for ever!' she pleaded. 'To-day's been centuries long. I was all to pieces last night, with that beastly tunnel, and then getting caught in that rotten way, and being jawed by that girl, and all! I know I was a rotter, to give it all away to her, but I didn't know what I was saying—honest, I didn't!'

Dick had been even more lonely than she. Della could at least find companions among the other girls; but he was not prepared to surrender so easily, and had felt all day very much out of his element in such a feminine company. He had agreed to come most unwillingly, and only because it seemed the least of several evils; he had counted on his sister's companionship to help him through, and had viewed her 'adoption' by Jen and Jack with dismay. 'All my own fault, too!' he had groaned, repenting of his angry words of the morning, but unwilling to admit it and apologise. But he felt he had driven her from him and into their arms, and had been hoping all day that she would make the first move towards renewed friendship. Not that he meant to tell her any more secrets! But it would not do to let her get too chummy with these other girls. That would mean loneliness for himself during the whole of their stay in the school.

So Della's advance came as a great relief. He did not show it, of course, but kept a discreetly aloof manner, with a touch of condescension in it, as he said coolly, 'Getting tired of the school kids? I wouldn't stick to them *every* minute, if I were you. You won't have much of a time. I guess you'd find it jolly slack to turn into a pi goody-goody little angel all at once.'

It was a far cleverer speech than he knew. At that moment a tug-of-war for Della began. To be a pi goody-goody little angel! Could anything be more hateful? Her whole nature rose in revolt, and what Joan had feared came true. The influence of Jen and Jack was not strong enough to stand such a strain as this.

'I'm not!' she said indignantly. 'And I'm not going to be, either. You're a beast, Dicky Jessop!'

'Thought you'd begun to be one already.' Dick's indifferent tone gave no hint of his delight that he had 'scored' off her so quickly.

'You haven't any business to call me names like that!' Della flashed at him, thoroughly roused by the insult. 'Pi little angel yourself! You've been meek and mild enough all day! I'm good for anything you are! What is it you're planning now? I know there's something! There must be something up; you're so frightfully quiet!'

'Ah!' Dick said mysteriously. 'Wouldn't you like to know? But you'd begin to cry, and run and tell the Joan-girl!'

Della flung herself upon him, raging. Dick chuckled; this was like old times, after the strained relations of the day! 'All right, old thing!' he said amiably, struggling to disentangle her hands from his hair. 'I only wanted to get your monkey up. You've been so beastly wishy-washy all day; I began to think you must be sickening for measles. Do you know where she keeps the key of this rotten gate?'

'Who? Who takes charge of it?'

'The Joan-girl, I guess. She seems to be "some" boss, I don't know why.'

'It's because she's the Queen for this year. But in the abbey she bosses because it's hers. The house is Joy's; isn't it weird?'

'Joy's Carrots, isn't she?'

'As to that,' Della grinned, 'there's not much to choose between them. They're as like as twins! But Joy's the one that guessed your tune. I expect Joan has the key, Dick. What do you want it for?'

Dick winked. 'To get into the abbey, Little Angel.'

Della let the renewed insult pass in her eagerness. 'What for? What do you want to do there?'

‘Ask Nanny why she didn’t pack my stamp-album.’

‘Dick, you’re a beast! You might tell me!’

‘So that you could tell—no, I didn’t say it! Pax, you idiot!’ as Della launched herself on him again.

He sprang away just in time. ‘I’m going to ask her for the key!’ he shouted, and ran to the house, with Della at his heels.

Joy had just struck up a lively tune, and the girls were hastily forming sets of eight. As Dick crossed the room boldly, walking through the midst of the dancers, Joan was shaking her head to eager Jen, who had enjoyed the promised ‘We Won’t Go Home Till Morning,’ with Joy so much that she was eager to attempt every dance that was proposed. ‘Too hard, Jenny-Wren! You must learn it first; you’d be left miles behind. You must know your figures in “Mage.” But you watch; it’s quite pretty. After this we’ll have “Bonnets So Blue,” and I’ll take you all down the line and up again. That needs no learning. What do *you* want?’ as she found Dick at her elbow.

He put his request boldly—the key of the abbey gate, so that he might go and speak to Ann Watson about his missing album.

Joan frowned. ‘I’d rather you didn’t go there without me! I don’t trust you. Well, just this once! It won’t take you twenty minutes just to go through and ask her. I shall watch the clock, and if you aren’t back here with the key in twenty minutes I shall come after you. See? Jen, you know where the key is, and you aren’t dancing this. Would you mind getting it and going with him? Don’t trust him with it! If I go it will mean seven others sitting out; we’re just right for four sets.’

‘I’ll go,’ Jen said willingly, and went to fetch the key.

Della could not understand it, and dared not ask more questions while any one was present. Knowing that there had never been an album to pack, she was inclined to look on Dick’s errand as ‘a silly business’—unless there was something lying behind. She strongly suspected this to be the case, but did not yet see what it could be. And she had a sudden and very novel doubt as to the morality of Dick’s proceedings. This was the kind of thing, she supposed, which Jen and Jack described as ‘not straight.’ But how could she say so after Dick’s cutting remarks on her alleged reformation? Feeling very uncomfortable, and anything but a ‘pi little angel,’ she followed Dick, who had followed Jen, and had attained his object unsuspected by either of the girls.

He had seen where the key was kept.

CHAPTER XXII

'A LITTLE ANGEL'

The inquiries in the abbey did not take long. Mrs Watson had seen no album, and Dick did not seem surprised, though he described its size and colour minutely, while Della listened in growing dismay.

'It must have been left in London,' Dick decided carelessly. 'I thought I'd ask you, but it doesn't matter a scrap, really; I don't want to lose it, that's all; it's got some rather valuable stamps in it. But I guess it's safe at home; I never used it much in the summer, anyway; sticking in stamps is a winter stunt! Thanks awfully, Nanny. Sorry to have worried you. We'd best get back at once, or the Joan-girl will get the wind up proper.'

Jen smothered a laugh at this horrible sentence, and led the way back with as grave a face as she could manage. She locked the gate carefully and put the key back in its place, hanging on a nail in a small cupboard in the housekeeper's room, unconscious that every action was being keenly watched by Dick. Then she hurried back to the big hall to report to Joan that all was well, and to see if she could still have her dance.

'Oh, yes! We put it off. We waited for you,' Joan laughed. 'You've got those two both safely out? Good for you, Jenny-Wren! Did he hear anything of the album? I expect he never brought it. Well, it's almost time to stop, but we'll have "Bonnetts So Blue" for you, as I promised it. As we were in sets of eight, we just carried on and did "If all the World were Paper" and "Goddesses"; you can see everybody's out of breath! Longways, girls, as soon as you're ready! This will be the last dance for to-night. Now, Jenny-Wren, we're Ones; I'm going to lead you down and turn you under and skip you up again; and then mind you cast out properly—just as you did in "We Won't Go Home"!'

'Oh, it's topping!' Jen laughed, as they met again, Joan's arms flung out to meet her, and she found herself whirled round and round, and yet keeping time to the music. 'I do like dancing! And I like dancing with *you*!'

'You'll be a good member of the Hamlet Club!' Joan said, with approval.

Dick and Della were watching the skipping stars and lines of girls, but both were far away in thought. Della had refused Kathy's invitation to return to her perch beside Jack; she still had something to say to Dick.

At the call of 'Thanks awfully, Joy!' which closed the dance, an eager crowd gathered round Joan begging for 'Just one more!' and all suggesting what the one more should be. Joan glanced at the clock, and yielded with a laugh. 'Just one, then, if Miss Macey is willing; and then the day-girls will simply have to fly! "Galopede," Joy! Don't run away, Jen! You're quite all right for this!'

'But I never even heard of it before!' cried Jen, with eager eyes.

'Doesn't matter. You're going to dance it right away. Take hands—no, not mine; those on each side of you. Now do as the rest do; you tell her, girls. You'll know it after the first couple's gone down the middle once, Jenny-Wren. It's as simple as anything. Ready, everybody? Thanks, Joy!'—and to Jen's amazement she found herself running forward and back, led by the girls on each side of her, crossing as they did, with a swift caution from her neighbour, 'Pass *right* shoulder always!' and being swung in the middle by Joan, as if she had danced 'Galopede' all her life. A few strenuous but very enjoyable moments of this were

enough, and then each couple in turn had swung to the end of the line. Everybody collapsed on the floor, panting and laughing, and the dancing was over for the evening.

‘I’m starving hungry!’ said Jen in much surprise. ‘Coo-oo! Glad I’m not a day-girl! We ought to give them supper!’

‘It would make them too late home. They’ll eat chocolate,’ Joan laughed. ‘I’ve often done it myself. Everybody’s hungry after dancing. It’s exercise!’

‘It is!’ Joy came up to them. ‘Even playing’s exercise when it’s Galopeding at that rate.’

‘It was far too quick, though, Joy! Were you doing it on purpose?’

‘Yes, of course. I thought I’d better tire them out, since “Goddesses” hadn’t done it, or they’d begin that “Just one more!” business again, and then they wouldn’t “Go Home Till Morning”!’

‘Oh, yes, they would! I’m quite strong-minded enough for that! This was positively the last. But you did race us round. I shouted at you, but you didn’t seem to hear.’

Joy smiled. ‘I heard you all right. But you’ve got to dance to the music! Oh, I heard you instructing Mrs Wren! I jolly well made you do it that time!’

Out in the garden, Dick and Della were having a very brief conversation, which yet left its mark on the situation between them. They had only a moment, as Miss Macey rang the bell for supper immediately, but it was enough.

‘Dick, why did you want to ask Nanny that silly question? You knew the answer. It was mad to ask her,’ Della insisted.

‘Think so, old bean? All right! You can go on thinking it. I got what I wanted, though you may not believe it.’

‘What did you want, Dick? Don’t be a pig! You’ve always told me things!’

‘And you’ve never given me away till last night!’ he retorted.

‘Aren’t you going to tell me?’ she demanded.

‘No jolly fear! I know a thing or two! Not twice, old thing!’

Then Della took her courage in both hands, and spoke out the new thought which had been troubling her. Unfortunately, in her anger, it came as a taunt, not as a tactful remonstrance. ‘Well, I don’t like the way you’re going on! It’s not decent! I don’t know what you’re doing it for, but you’re cheating everybody about that stamp-album. It’s not—not straight—and I don’t like it!’ A new sense of honesty, born of the knowledge that these girls with whom she was living had different standards from hers up till this time, was struggling for utterance. Until now, it had never troubled her that her actions and Dick’s—they had always been the same—were ‘not straight.’

But Dick had no qualms. He laughed her new scruples to scorn. ‘Goody-goody!’ he mocked cruelly. ‘Didn’t I tell you so? You’re catching it, D. You’ll be a good little girl in three days.’

‘I *won*!’ she stormed. ‘And I hate you! But I hate to hear you telling lies all round!’

‘Haven’t told one yet, old bean!’

‘Oh, yes, you have! It’s just as bad, anyway, when you go to ask about a book that doesn’t exist. You’ve done it twice to-day. That’s saying there *is* a stamp-album, and that’s a lie. So there!’

Dick shrugged his shoulders and laughed again. ‘You’re going even quicker than I thought—turning into a pi little angel, I mean. You’ll do for a copy-book girl in no time,’ he jeered. ‘And the joke of it all is, it’s because I’ve a stunt on and won’t let you into it. If you knew all about it, you’d be keen enough, and you wouldn’t go on rotting like this. We wouldn’t hear

any more about “lies” and “cheating” then. It’s only because you’re left out this time. It’s only because you’re mad!” and he strolled in to supper, leaving her panting and dismayed.

She followed presently, white and silent, and neither her ‘mother’ nor her ‘father’ could coax a word from her. Was it true? It had cost her something to speak out, for she had known he would be very angry. But her uneasiness at his deceit had driven her to it. Was it true that she would have been as bad if she had been in the secret? Up till now she had been; she admitted that. But it was because she had not thought.

That night both Dick and Della had an adventure. Hers came first. Jen, lying utterly spent after those last strenuous dances, very happy but too weary to move an unnecessary muscle, slept within a few minutes. Jack lay awake longer, the tune of ‘Galopede’ ringing through her brain. Suddenly she sat up and listened. Then she slipped out of bed and across to Jen’s side. Though the ‘father of the family,’ she relied on her better half in every emergency, and had a touching faith that Jen would know what to do. She shook her ruthlessly.

‘Jen! Wake up!’ she whispered. ‘Jen, Della’s crying. She’s got her head under the bedclothes, but I can hear her. What shall we do? Do you think she’s homesick?’

Jen sat up and listened to the stifled sobs. ‘I shouldn’t think so. I guess she’s been scrapping with Dick,’ she said wisely. ‘I thought they were funny in the abbey this evening. They never spoke to one another, and you know how weird she looked afterwards! I wonder if she’ll tell us?’ and she slipped out of bed. ‘O-o-o-oh! I am stiff! I suppose it’s the dancing! I shan’t be able to get downstairs to-morrow!’

She seated herself on the edge of Della’s bed. ‘What’s the matter, kid? Oh, you needn’t say “nothing”! People like you don’t howl like that at ten o’clock for nothing. Don’t worry; the light’s not on, so I can’t see you. But I know you’re crying. Just you stop and tell me all about it, or I’ll go and fetch Joan.’ Her tone was full of gentle but decided authority.

‘You see,’ she explained afterwards, ‘when Della does collapse, she goes all to bits. We’d seen that the night before, when she howled because she was so fagged out, and told us all the secret. I saw she was all shaky again, and when people are like that, you just have to talk straight to them, that’s all. But I hoped she wasn’t going to do it every night!’

Della clung to her for sympathy. ‘I—I said things to Dick, and he’s mad. And he calls me a little angel!’

Jen’s laugh rang out, and Jack chuckled. ‘Della! Don’t be so funny!’ she begged. ‘You mustn’t, in the middle of the night! It—it isn’t *done*! Jen, if anybody hears you shriek like that, we shall all get into an awful row! It’s past ten o’clock!’

‘I’m sorry!’ Jen calmed down hurriedly. ‘Della, I oughtn’t to have laughed. It was mean. But surely you aren’t so daft as to care what he says, if he’s as silly as that? You *aren’t* an angel, nor anything like! I shouldn’t worry, if I were you.’

‘But I want to know,’ Della insisted. ‘For I’d hate to be one, and he said——’

‘Never mind what he said. You’d hate what? Oh, to be an angel! I see!’ Jen laughed again, but under her breath this time. ‘I don’t think you’ve gone very far yet, Della. What made Dick say anything so—so unlikely! So horrid, I suppose you’d like me to say!’

Jack giggled again. ‘Awfully horrid thing to be—an angel!’ she agreed, sitting cuddling her toes at the end of Della’s bed.

‘He said a goody-goody pi little angel,’ Della explained resentfully.

‘Oh, I see! That was rather beastly,’ Jen admitted sympathetically. ‘But what made him say it, Della? I haven’t—well, I haven’t seen it coming on, you know!’

‘Neither have I!’ Jack said emphatically.

‘I said he wasn’t straight, and he cheated people, and did things that were the same as telling lies.’

‘I say, you don’t do things by halves, you two, do you?’ Jack said admiringly. ‘That was jolly straight talk—one in the eye for Dick! Wasn’t it, Jen?’

‘Rather! But what I want to know is this.’ Jen nursed her knees and surveyed Della thoughtfully as well as she could in the moonlight. ‘What made you think he wasn’t straight? It’s true, of course; but you didn’t seem to see it last night.’

Jack looked at her admiringly. Once more Jen had gone swift and unerring to the root of the matter.

‘I don’t know.’ Della could not explain her sudden change of front, nor the enlightenment which had come. ‘I just felt it, somehow. I didn’t like the things he was saying and doing, and I told him so. And—and he said—her voice broke—‘he said I was only saying it because he wouldn’t tell me—things I wanted to know!’ She caught herself back just in time from a second betrayal of Dick. It would not do to tell any one he had another secret! That would set them all to spying on him at once. ‘I’d hate to be goody-goody, and pi, and proper!’ she went on stormily, and so quickly that Jen and Jack had no time to perceive the hint she had given them. ‘It would be hateful! We’ve always loathed that kind of person! And I’ll never be one!’

‘I don’t think you’re in much danger yet,’ Jen laughed. ‘But being straight isn’t the same as being goody-goody, Della. Everybody that’s decent at all tries all they know to be straight. You *have* to be straight! It’s only decent. But that hasn’t anything to do with being proper and pi. They’re quite different things. And being goody is hateful. Everybody loathes that. Nobody wants you to be like that!’

‘If we see it beginning, we shall jolly well squash it out of you quickly!’ Jack promised her.

‘But you have to be straight, and keep your word, and never say what isn’t true. People ought to be able to trust you,’ Jen spoke seriously, though she did not realise that she was giving Della her creed for life. ‘They ought to know that when you say you’ll do a thing you will do it, and that if you promise not to, you won’t, and that things happened just as you say they did, and so on. They ought to be able to depend on you, and on what you say. You and Dick aren’t like that, you know.’

‘But that’s not being a good little angel,’ Jack insisted.

‘We’ve never cared. We’ve never thought it mattered,’ Della whispered.

‘Perhaps you didn’t understand,’ said Jen, with large charity. ‘But you jolly well do now, for we’ve told you. Now that you know how much it matters, you’ve got to be different, whatever Dick says, or you’ll be a downright rotter, you know.’

Della quivered. ‘He said——’ her mind reverting to Dick’s last taunt. But again she checked the explanation, fearing to betray him. ‘He said it was only because I was mad with him. It wasn’t! It was because—because of things you’d said. I knew you felt differently, and I tried to tell him so.’

‘I guess Dick just said it because he was mad himself,’ Jen said wisely. ‘If you had a regular bust-up with him, what’s the good of worrying over what he said or what you said? Most likely you both said tons more than you meant. I should go to sleep and forget all about him, if I were you.’

‘He’s not worth worrying about, anyway,’ Jack murmured.

‘He is!’ Della heard the words.

‘Go to bed, Jack!’ Jen ordered peremptorily. ‘Go to sleep, Della! Mother says there’s been enough talky-talky for this time of night! Goodness me, children! It’s nearly eleven o’clock! But you will remember about being straight, and that it’s not the same at all as being goody or pi, won’t you, Della?’

‘I’ll try,’ Della whispered. ‘I say, Jen! Thanks awfully!’

‘Good-night, old thing!’ Jen knew better than to offer to kiss her. She stood up with difficulty—‘Oh, my knees! I suppose it’s the skipping! O-o-o-oh! Good-night, everybody!’ and she crawled back to bed and dropped there wearily and lay still.

Dick, sitting up half dressed, with very definite intention in his eye, struck a match and looked at his watch. A few minutes past ten—was it too early? Could he be sure everybody would be asleep?

As he hesitated, a girl’s laugh rang out from the room below. Frowning, he lay down to wait for another hour. Some silly kid was still wideawake!

Then he was thankful for the laugh that had warned him. For some minutes later he heard a door close softly, and knew that only now had some one in authority, probably Miss Macey or Mrs Shirley, gone into her room. But for that girl’s laugh, he might—awful thought!—have walked right into somebody’s arms!

For more than an hour he waited, but decided then to risk it, lest his plans should be upset by too long a delay. Dressing noiselessly, he crept out, wearing silent plimsolls, Della’s torch with his own in his pocket, and stole downstairs like a mouse or a burglar. The fascination of the unknown was upon him, and he knew he could only hope to explore by night. He slid down the wide banister rail lest any stair should creak, slipped across the hall, keeping well in shadow and needing no torch because the moon shone so brightly, and found his way without difficulty to the housekeeper’s room.

An awful dread seized him as he entered. Suppose the Joan-girl—he always thought of her so—took the key of the abbey up to her own room at night? Suppose she slept with it under her pillow? That would be too horribly rotten luck!

But the key hung there, where Jen had placed it. Chortling softly, he slipped it into his pocket. Now for the pantry window! During his seemingly aimless wanderings, while the girls were dancing in the hall, he had examined the smaller windows, and, unseen even by the servants, had tried several till he had found one which opened without a sound. It gave him no trouble now. He slipped through and dropped to the ground, then fled across the lawn, keeping always in shadow, to the old gate in the abbey wall.

CHAPTER XXIII DICK'S DISCOVERY

'That you, Mick?'

'Thought you wasn't comin',' Micky grumbled, creeping out from under a currant bush.

'Couldn't help it. They wouldn't go to bed. Did you get in easily?'

'Easy as winkin'. They'm all asleep at lodge. But I come over front wall, just to be sure. It's easy enough.'

'I know. I've been there myself,' Dick grinned. He was fitting the key to the lock as he spoke.

'Can you turn it? Is it stiff?' Micky asked with interest.

'Not a scrap. I saw a kid do it this evening. There you are! Now come on to the dungeons!'

He closed the gate carefully, and led the way through the abbot's garden, bidding Micky keep in the shade of the buildings whenever possible. 'Moon's so beastly bright. But it will save our torches. I've brought one for you. Your grand-dad didn't catch you, then?'

'Naw! No fear! They'm both sleepin'. Thinks I be too.'

'You're going to do something much more exciting than sleeping,' Dick laughed. 'How weird this old place looks by moonlight! That girl's crazy about it. I wonder she doesn't come here to rave about "moonlight effects"! Now this is the chapter-house, and here's the old door I told you of.'

Micky followed him into the blackness of the tunnel with some misgivings, thankful for Della's torch in his hand. He was eager for the adventure, and delighted and flattered that at last he had been invited to take part and had been chosen instead of Della. Dick had explained with quite unnecessary clearness his reasons for requiring outside assistance, and had told of the find of treasure with full and most unwise detail. Micky had listened open-mouthed, and was keenly excited over the prospect of a possible second find; but he did not like black tunnels in the depths of the earth at midnight, and was decidedly nervous as he followed, keeping as close to Dick as he could.

Torches in hand, they crept round behind the staircase, and Micky shivered again. Dick shivered, too, but only with the excitement and joy that thrilled him. He had outwitted them all, and, in spite of Joan and Joy, here he was exploring the abbey still further, unknown to any of them! Even if he made no discoveries this time, or if the discoveries were disappointing, he would have this triumphant knowledge that he had been one too many for the red-haired girls!

'There's a tunnel here,' he explained, 'going out away from the steps—not under the chapter-house; that's where the stair and passage are; but going the other way, away from the abbey. Looks to me as if it went under that place where they say the big church used to be, where they show you the old pavement with the figures on it, you know.' Micky nodded. He knew the abbey ruins well. 'Perhaps it leads to some other secret entrance, like the one up in the woods. Wouldn't that be topping? Then we could come in and out whenever we liked. Nobody knows there's anything here; nobody but you and me. You must keep quiet about it, of course. Those old chaps must have worked jolly hard, burrowing out all these tunnels! Regular old moles they must have been. Hallo! This one isn't a tunnel at all! Here's the end! What is it? A cellar?'

Micky was at his side in an instant, as the passage widened out suddenly and allowed them room to stand. They flashed their torches in every direction, and looked curiously all round the underground chamber in which they found themselves.

It was no cellar, or, if a cellar, had been built with unusual care. Even to their untrained eyes the roof was curious—great round stone arches, curving and crossing one another in beautiful vaulting, every line perfect, every arch ornamented with wonderful moulding, and all in excellent repair. Buried here for centuries, unvisited and untouched, there had been nothing and no one to destroy or deface, and the crypt—though the boys did not recognise it as such—stood as it had always been. Directly before them, as they stood in the entrance of the passage, four huge round pillars in the middle of the floor rose from the corners of a small square platform of stone, raised about a foot from the floor, and on this, when the boys went to examine it, was some almost defaced lettering. The pillars met above it in a kind of canopy, forming beautiful vaulting again, and were richly decorated at bases and capitals with carvings of flowers and wreaths of leaves, and bunches of fruit, with here and there the face of an angel.

Dick knit his brows. ‘What a weird hole it is! Looks as if this was the most important part of it—some old chap’s tomb, or something. I wonder if the whole place was built just to bury him in? And who was he, anyhow? But I don’t see any sign of treasure,’ he said disappointedly. ‘Just pillars and arches and a big grave! We might as well not have come! We didn’t want just to find more bits of her silly old abbey! There’s enough of it, and she’s crazy enough about it, as it is.’

‘There’s a door over yonder,’ Micky ventured.

Dick went to investigate. The door, of old wood with big iron facings and nails, yielded without difficulty and he drew it open eagerly. But here again was disappointment; their lights showed only a tumbled mass of blocks of stone, completely closing up any passage.

‘Must have been a stair. See, there’s the first step!’ Dick said gloomily. ‘They must have had some other way down, of course. They didn’t always crawl under those old stairs. Wonder where it led to?’

The ruined steps could not tell them, however, so they closed the door and examined the little chamber minutely.

‘It’s bigger’n I thought,’ Micky remarked. ‘There’s more pillars over here. But they ain’t pretty like those others.’

At the far end of the crypt, which was oblong in shape, were four more pillars in the middle of the floor, again with a raised square of stone between them. But, as Micky said, there were differences. Even to ignorant eyes, these were rude coarse work compared with the others, the decoration consisting of straight rough lines and sharp angles instead of the beautifully-wrought flowers and foliage of the central group. The edges of bases and capitals were rubbed and broken; the pillars themselves were stouter and heavier; it was all ruder and earlier work, and even Micky felt it as he said vaguely, ‘ ‘Tain’t so fancy-like as t’others.’

‘Perhaps it’s older,’ said Dick, with more truth than he knew. ‘There aren’t any letters on this one,’ and he climbed up on to the low platform.

Then he drew back with a quick cry. ‘It’s a hole—maybe a well! Be careful, Mick! It goes right down; looks awfully deep!’

They hung over the edge of the rude, round basin together and peered into the depths. Micky brought a scrap of stone from the ruined stair, and they listened as it fell.

‘No water, and not so frightfully deep, after all,’ Dick said promptly. ‘I wouldn’t care to fall down, all the same. It’s a beast of a place.’

Micky was very uneasy; he did not like the look of it at all, and hinted vaguely that ‘something’ might come up out of the earth at them through the hole.

Dick laughed this to scorn. ‘It’s only an old well gone dry. Perhaps it was frightfully holy once, and that’s why they built the pillars round it,’ he said, with no idea how nearly he had hit the mark.

Micky edged away and sought anxiously for further discoveries, which might draw Dick from that uncanny black hole. ‘Here’s a summat!’ he announced presently, and Dick came to look.

The ‘summat’ proved to be letters cut in the wall, roughly hewn and quaintly shaped, but legible. ‘J E’—Dick chuckled amazedly—‘H A N E’—and underneath ‘I I I.’ ‘A hundred and eleven?’ Dick murmured. ‘Or is it three, like on a clock? He couldn’t be a hundred and eleven! Wonder who the old chap was? J E again!’ he laughed. ‘Seems to haunt us!’

‘Gets light early these days, Master Dick,’ Micky hinted, when they had wandered round for some time longer. ‘And I got a longish bit to go. Folks be up early in village.’

‘And if you’re caught you won’t be able to come again,’ that was obvious to Dick. He was not particularly anxious for Micky’s safety, but he might want his help again some other night. And if Micky were caught and questioned, he might lose his head and say too much. It would be better to run no risks.

So, much disappointed that their discovery had yielded no results but an underground chamber, a few old pillars, a tomb, a dried-up well, and an inscription on the wall, they retraced their steps, climbed the stair, and made their way back to the garden of the Hall.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ROMANCE OF THE LADY JEHANE

It was plain to Della next morning that Dick had a secret. Miss Macey and the schoolgirls, not knowing him so well, saw nothing suspicious in his bright mysterious eyes and tight-pressed lips. But Della knew, and writhed because he made no move to include her in it. She did not question him, knowing it would only mean a rebuff; but she watched him intently from a distance, saying nothing even to Jen or Jack, and Dick knew it and laughed unkindly. His eyes met hers now and then with a mocking triumph in them, and Della turned away quickly lest she should fly at him and shake him in public.

There was no time for excitements of that kind, however. It was Saturday, and the whole of the boarders were sent out with Mademoiselle and Miss Anskell for a long morning in the woods and up on the hills behind the abbey, which the girls had not yet explored. In the afternoon the cricket field was at their disposal, as Joan had promised, and all the cricketers, and most of the members of the Hamlet Club, hurried there as soon as dinner was over, while many day-girls cycled from their homes and joined them in the field. Della went, as a matter of course, with Jack, to join Kathy and Molly, who had promised to come for practice; and Dick, after some hesitation, swallowed his pride and his objection to girls and went too, seeing a very dull afternoon before him if he did not. Joy went with the crowd, partly because she was always happiest in a 'mob,' as she said, and partly to keep things running smoothly in case of need; during her year as Queen, she had had plenty of experience and had learned to use her authority, and was quite prepared to act as umpire, or arbitrator in disputes, whether invited to do so or not.

The tennis lawn behind the Hall had been newly rolled and marked, and the net was up. A number of the elder girls, reinforced by day-girls like Edna and Peggy, Muriel and others, brought their racquets and made up sets, and Joan joined this party. She was not one of the first to play, however; though invited to take first turn, she indignantly refused, as being, not exactly owner of the court, but a very close relation; her place would be to play last, of course, she insisted, and sat on the bank to watch.

Then she sprang up at sight of a small figure approaching. 'Jenny-Wren! I thought you'd gone to watch the cricket! Don't you want to see how your husband and family get on? Or do you want to have a try at tennis?'

'No! But I want something else frightfully badly, Joan. They'll tell me all about the cricket later.'

'I'm quite sure they will! What do you want?'

'Those lovely old books we found—could I look at them quietly, all by myself? You know I'll be careful. There's such a crowd round staring at them all the time. I thought perhaps while they're all busy I could have a go on my own. I want to see if I can read any of them, and to look at all the wee pictures in the borders. I'll touch them ever so gently, Joan!'

'I'm sure you will!' Joan laughed. 'It's a good idea. I'd rather like to come myself! I haven't examined them yet, either, and I've been meaning to. But I'll play one game anyway; perhaps I'll come and join you later. All right, Jenny-Wren! You go and study the books all on the quiet. I'm afraid they're mostly prayers or psalms, though; you won't find anything very

exciting. Miss Macey's out, so I guess you can sit in her study, if you don't touch anything but the books.'

Jen nodded happily and ran off, and Joan laughed as she returned to the court. It was a pleasure to see the artistic side of slangy tom-boy Jen forcing itself into life. Jen's delight in the abbey, her understanding of Joan's love for it, her appreciation of the beautiful old manuscripts, were of a piece with her joy in the old folk-dances and their quaint music, and made her choice of the Hamlet Club instead of the cricket not so unnatural as it had seemed at first. It had cost Jen a pang to decide against cricket, Joan was sure of that, for she had played with her brothers all her life; but, as she said, there was nothing new in cricket to her and she could have it all the holidays; and the pull of the folk-music and dances had been irresistible. Some artistic sense in her had responded to their call, and in her enjoyment of the practice dance the night before she had known, and Joan had seen, that she had chosen rightly.

Joan was a keen observer and student of the younger girls, and she was not May Queen for nothing. She had had two years out of school, while acting as guardian of the abbey, and had returned to school life with a point of view rather older than was natural to her age. She was amused at Jen's rapid development, but much interested and full of sympathy; Jen's interests seemed likely to be on the same lines as her own, and they had much in common in spite of the three years between them.

After she had played one game, she withdrew from the court, and went in search of Jen, wondering if she could really have found enough in the old books to keep her busy for more than an hour, or if she had tired of them and gone to the field after all.

But Jen was curled up in a big leather chair, a slim volume in her hands, an absorbed look on her face, and she never heard Joan enter and was unaware of her presence till she jumped in startled surprise at Joan's exclamation—'Jenny-Wren! You don't mean to say you're *reading* them?'

'Oh! But of course I am!' Jen pushed back her yellow plaits and turned a flushed face and shining eyes to her. 'It's frightfully exciting, Joan! It's absolutely topping!'

Joan laughed. 'Whatever are you reading? Not prayers, nor a "Book of Hours," to make you look like that! I think I'd better see it, Mrs Wren. What have you got hold of, and how did you find it?'

'Oh, it's not one of the stodgy ones! It's a story, Joan—a love-story! At least, *I* think he was in love with her! It sounds jolly like it to me! Of course, he doesn't say so, for he was hardly supposed to know her; but he did, and they met secretly, when she went to the abbey church for prayers——'

'Goodness gracious, kid, what have you got hold of?' Joan dropped on the arm of the chair and looked over her shoulder. 'Oh, that queer little book! I've been meaning to have another look at that one. I didn't give any time to it, as it had no borders or illuminations. I wondered why it had been saved, as a matter of fact.'

'It does look dull, beside the others,' Jen acknowledged. 'But I looked at them first, and though they're pretty, they were either in Latin, or else something awfully dull. Then I found this one, and wondered about the girl on the cover, and the funny name. It's like mine, or yours. Is it an old way of saying Jen, or Joan, or Jane, do you think?' and she held up the little book, bound simply in white vellum, with no jewels or embroidery, but with a rudely-drawn outline of a girl's head and shoulders; she was wearing a curious Tudor head-dress and veil, and round the drawing were the words—'Ye Booke of Ye Ladye Jehane.' It was filled with neat, small writing, with no illustrations, no break of the manuscript into paragraphs or

conversation, with quaint long letters and curious spelling; but it was in English, and Jen's curiosity had given her patience to investigate and try to find out why the girl with the name like her own had had a whole book made about her.

'It is an old name,' Joan said thoughtfully. 'I've seen Joan of Arc referred to as Jehane. It's all the same, anyway—Jane or Jen or Joan or Jehane. It does look difficult to read!'

'Yes, but I've made out a good deal of it, and it's jolly well worth it! The spelling's ghastly, of course!'

'It would be, according to our ideas,' Joan laughed. 'Suppose you tell me what you've made out, Jenny-Wren, and save me puzzling it out for myself.'

'I'd love to!' Jen said eagerly. 'As far as I can make out, Lady Jehane lived here——'

'In the Hall?' Joan raised her eyebrows. 'Was it built before those books were buried? That must have been 1536, you know. That's when that beast Henry VIII. was on the war-path. Of course, we've always known the house was Tudor.'

'Her father built it; it was just finished, the book says, when her mother died. She was the Lady Anne.'

'Oh, I see! Well, what's the story, Jenny-Wren?'

'It's written by a man called Ambrose,' Jen said eagerly. 'He was a monk in the abbey—at least, he wasn't a proper monk, I think, but he was going to be.'

'A lay brother.' Joan nodded, much interested. This peopling of her loved abbey with real characters seemed to bring it all very much nearer. 'I feel as if the abbey was coming alive! Go on, Jen!'

'And he used to see Lady Jehane when she crossed the cloister garth on her way to prayers in the church.'

'He oughtn't to have been thinking about Lady Jehane! But it's extremely fascinating and romantic! She was young and very beautiful, I suppose?'

'He says she was "very fayre," and she was only "fifteene yeares" old.'

'Goodness me! But they were a lot older in those days,' Joan admitted. 'Juliet was only fourteen, and you know how she went on! Well? The lay brother used to watch Miss Jehane, did he? I guess he was young too!'

'Oh, I'm sure he was! But he didn't make love to her. He says he knew he mustn't do that. I think it's awfully sad; I nearly cried, but I never do cry over books; it's so potty! But he's such a brick about it. He just says he knows it "could never be," and so he watches her, and he made this little book about her, and put down in it every time he saw her. It's a kind of diary. "My Ladye rode abroad this daye"—"My Ladye went a-hawking"—"My Ladye and her maides go out to pluck the Maie on Maie-daye morning"—and so on. He puts down everything she does.'

'How sweet of him! And how awfully romantic! I'm afraid Brother Ambrose didn't get much work done, though, between watching for his lady and writing a book about her.'

'He wrote it at dead of night. He says so.'

'I can quite believe it!' Joan said grimly. 'There would have been deadly trouble if the abbot had found it! Well?'

'Oh, then there's all about the jewels! That's the exciting part! Her father went and got married again,' Jen explained eagerly. 'And the stepmother was just a beast.'

'Does Ambrose say so?' Joan laughed. 'If so, I doubt the genuineness of the document, Jenny-Wren!'

'What does that mean?' asked mystified Jen.

‘Only that “Just a beast” sounds rather modern for Ambrose.’

‘Oh, well, he doesn’t put it that way, but she must have been, because of the jewels, you see. Lady Jehane had some wonderful jewels, rubies and emeralds and sapphires and things, that had been her own mother’s, and the new mother wanted them, and the father, Sir Eustace, told Jehane to give them to her, and Jehane said she’d jolly well see them both farther before she’d do anything of the kind.’

‘Once more, please note we have Jenny-Wren’s version of what “fayre Ladye Jehane” said, not Brother Ambrose’s,’ Joan remarked, to the world at large. ‘But I guess she did say something of the kind, in a polite sixteenth-century way, of course. I don’t blame her; I’d have refused somewhat strongly myself.’

‘Rather! Not half! He says she was “very wroth”; I guess she “got the wind up proper,” as Dick says. Anyway, there was a fearful row, and she brought all the jewels to Ambrose and asked him to hide them for her.’

‘Oh! Then they were friends? There was something between them?’ Joan shook her head. ‘This is very improper! A beautiful young lady at the Hall, in great distress—an interesting and no doubt handsome young monk in the abbey! I wonder if his white robe suited him? Well, Jen? What did he do? I guess he couldn’t refuse her anything?’

‘I always forget the white robes! I was seeing him all in black!’ Jen exclaimed. ‘The white’s much jollier! Oh, I’m sure he was handsome, though of course he doesn’t say so!’

Joan laughed at that—‘I was seeing him.’ ‘I’m not at all sure what the lay brothers wore,’ she said gravely. ‘Perhaps they only got the white robe when they’d taken the full vows. But what did Ambrose do, Jen? I suppose he felt he had to help his lady?’

‘He says he was a “cunning workman” with jewels; he’d learned at some place in France before he came here. He wasn’t clever at writing or illuminating, he says; he had “no great skylle to paint and was but a poore scribe,” though I think his writing’s not so bad—once you get used to it! But his stunt was——’

‘His gift! His talent!’ Joan laughed. ‘Jen, dear, the mixture of you and Ambrose in the story is rather staggering at times.’

‘I mean, what he could do was work with jewels, and he says he had embroidered some of those covers with pearls, and he’d made the gold and silver work for others, and so on. That was his job. So, to please Lady Jehane, he took the precious stones out of their setting, out of the gold necklaces and silver ear-rings and so on, and put in bits of coloured glass instead, and she left all the real jewels in his charge, and he hid them safely. Then she took the chains and rings and bracelets home, so that if her father took them he’d only get the sham things. Wasn’t it a topping idea?’

‘Awfully fine! But it seems to me there’d be a jolly old row when papa found out. For he would find out, you know. He’d soon see they were only glass; or the lady would!’

‘They did!’ Jen said, with relish. ‘It’s all here. But by that time the Lady Jehane had gone to London to visit her aunt, who was lady-in-waiting to the Queen.’

‘Which?’ queried Joan.

‘Which? Oh, of course, it was Henry VIII.! I don’t know!’

‘There were two, if this was the year the abbey was destroyed—1536—Queen Anne and Queen Jane! I hope for Jehane’s aunt’s sake, her Queen was Jane! Anne’s friends might not come off very well—Anne Boleyn, you know! But about the jewels, Jen?’

‘Well, there was nothing to make them think Brother Ambrose knew anything about the real jewels, you see.’

‘Just a lay brother in the abbey! No, of course they would never suspect him. But how did he hear about the trouble at the Hall?’

‘Oh, from the abbot! They were all frightfully worried by this time, because they’d heard about other abbeys being destroyed, and they thought this might be the next, so the abbot made plans about burying the plate and the abbey books, in what Ambrose calls “ye olde cave underneath ye woodes”—where we found them, you know.’

Joan nodded, wide-eyed. ‘Is that all in the book, Jenny-Wren? But it doesn’t tell how they buried them? Of course it couldn’t, for that book was buried with the rest.’

‘That’s just where I’d got to when you came in. He’s putting down all he means to do, and he says he’ll hide this little book with the rest, slipping it in at the last moment when no one would see it. Of course, it wouldn’t have done for any one to see it, for it gave away all the secrets.’

‘I wonder he risked it,’ Joan commented. ‘He couldn’t tell who would find the lot!’

‘I suppose he didn’t dare to carry it about with him, and he didn’t know where he’d get to if they were all driven out and scattered over the face of the earth.’

‘He’d have been wiser to burn it.’

‘Oh, but he couldn’t! It was all he’d got left of her!’ Jen cried.

Joan laughed. ‘Perhaps he followed her to London and gave the jewels back to her, and got absolved from his vows—he wasn’t a monk yet, you know—or became a Protestant, and married her! There’s a happy ending for you, Jenny-Wren!’

‘Yes, I like that. I hope it happened. But I don’t think he took the jewels. I was just reading what he decided to do with them. He was afraid to carry them with him, he says, and he couldn’t let them fall into her father’s hands or the abbot’s, and if he left them here Henry’s men would get them. So he was in an awful hole! If you’ll wait five minutes I’ll find out what he did with them; there’s only one page more to read.’

‘We’ll read it together,’ and Joan bent over her shoulder.

‘To bury them—in the old church—marking the place with her name!’ they spoke at the same moment.

‘Oh, I wonder where? And if they were ever found?’ Jen cried breathlessly.

‘The church! Oh, if *only* we had the church! I’ve always longed for even a little bit of it!’ Joan cried.

‘But you know where it was! Do you suppose if we dug up the pavement we could find the jewels?’ Jen ventured.

‘No!’ Joan said sharply. ‘I wouldn’t have it tried. The pavement’s been examined over and over again, and there’s no name like “Jehane” on it anywhere. I wouldn’t have it spoiled just for a chance.’

‘Oh, neither would I, if it would do it any harm! But perhaps he tells more exactly whereabouts it was. We know where all the pillars were, for the bottoms of them are still there. Suppose he said at the foot of a certain pillar?’

‘But he couldn’t dig up the church!’ Joan objected. ‘There were services every day and night. He’d have been seen!’

Jen was poring over the manuscript again. ‘He says “In ye olde church, neare ye well of St Ethelwyn ye holie.” Where on earth was that, Joan? You never showed me any old well. And who was she?’

Joan stared at her wide-eyed, then bent and read the sentence for herself. ‘“Near the well of St Ethelwyn!” “The *old* church!” That’s not our church at all; not the one that was

destroyed by Henry. That—but that’s only an old legend! We didn’t know it was true!’

‘I don’t understand.’ Jen stared at her in awed surprise. ‘Was there an older church? I wondered why he called it the *old* church? People don’t usually bother to call a thing old unless there’s a newer one.’

‘That’s so! Right as usual, Jen. It hadn’t struck me. It would be queer if he’d meant the big abbey church. But there’s a legend that there was an older church, dedicated to St Ethelwyn and built round a holy well, which was supposed to have the power of healing diseases. Ethelwyn was a very holy hermit, who lived here centuries before the monks came, and the old church had been built after his death round his well; it’s a man’s name, of course. “Wyn” meant “man” in old English; “Ethel” isn’t a girl’s name, as it’s used there; it just means “noble”—old Anglo-Saxon; German “adel” or “edel”—now you know all about those weird “Ethel” names! But Ethelwyn was a hermit. They say the abbey church was built on the site of the old one, so we supposed St Ethelwyn’s had disappeared altogether. But if Ambrose buried the jewels in it, near the holy well——’

‘It must have been there, all right, less than four hundred years ago!’ Jen agreed swiftly. ‘But I suppose it would be pulled down with the rest?’

‘I suppose so,’ Joan said slowly. ‘I don’t see why it should escape. And yet lots of the abbey buildings did! Ambrose evidently knew all about it. Oh, I wish he’d written just a little more!’

‘That’s the very last word!’ Jen closed the little book with a sigh. ‘Can’t you see it all? He buries Jehane’s jewels in the hermit’s church, wherever it was, and writes about it in her book; then the alarm comes, and they’re told they must leave the abbey. They hurry to bury the cups and salvers and things, as the abbot had planned, and one monk brings the books and packs them in the old chest; and when he isn’t looking Ambrose slips Lady Jehane’s little book in among the rest; and then the earth is piled on top, and the passage is never even dreamt of, so the treasure-chamber isn’t discovered for hundreds of years! And then *we* come along—thanks to Dick and Della!’

‘Chiefly thanks to Della! I still think Ambrose was foolish to leave his secret for any one to find,’ Joan argued. ‘For they might have come back and dug up the treasures, while he or Jehane was still alive, and it might have got them into dreadful trouble.’

‘Perhaps he hadn’t time to think it over carefully. I expect it all happened in a rush at the end, and all he thought of was how to keep her book safe. Oh, *Joan!*’

‘What is it?’ Joan laughed, at the intense pleading in her voice. ‘What is it now, Jenny-Wren?’

‘*May* I tell the other girls the story? They’d all love it so!’

‘And you love telling a story!’ Joan nodded. ‘But I don’t see why it should be a secret. And it’s your discovery. Yes, you may tell them, Jenny-Wren. To-night after tea, before the day-girls go home, if you like. I’ll get them together for you, and you shall hold forth, and tell the whole romance of Ambrose and the Lady Jehane, and the lost jewels and the vanished church and the hermit’s well!’

‘Tophole!’ Jen murmured ecstatically. ‘I do love romantic and exciting things!’

‘And this is one, sure enough!’ Joan laughed ‘Everybody will be thrilled, won’t they?’

CHAPTER XXV

AN ALL-NIGHT AFFAIR

While Jen, seated in state on the end of the big table, told her story to an enthralled audience, juniors on the floor at her feet, seniors standing or sitting outside the ring, Dick in the background listened with wide, startled eyes. If any one had had time to look at him, his intense excitement must have aroused comment, if it had not betrayed him. The girls were deeply interested in the story, but Dick was more. For surely he had been in the 'old church'? Surely he had seen the hermit's well? Surely the 'Jehane' of the inscription on the wall must be the Jehane of Jen's story?

Had he—awful though fascinating thought—been within reach of the lost jewels? Were they still where Ambrose had hidden them? One thing was certain; he must get back to the underground church at the earliest opportunity. And none of these girls must guess his secret! What he would do with the jewels if he found them and yet kept the secret to himself, he could not have said; it was the glory of the discovery, of gloating over the thought of Joan's ignorance, that he coveted. Sooner or later, he supposed she would have to know, if any jewels were found; but he meant first of all to have the thrilling knowledge for which he thirsted, that he and he alone had found the secret hoard, that they must come to him for help to find it.

Perhaps—glorious thought!—he could make terms, insist that he be released from all lessons, allowed to go out when and where he wished, given the freedom of the abbey! It was a fascinating hope, and he was determined to realise it if he could. Certainly no one should learn the secret except in the way and at the time he wished!

Jen told her story well and dramatically, while Joan, on the outside of the ring, watched her with appreciation and laughed in sympathy. Before Jen had finished, many a girl could see the 'fayre Jehane' tripping across the cloister garth to pray in the big church, and on her way home 'just happening,' as Jen said, to meet handsome young Ambrose in his white robe and black cowl; could see him watch in reverent longing as she rode out, her falcon on her wrist, her maids and squires in attendance, while he dug in the abbey gardens near the high road, 'just happening' to be at that duty at the time his lady was used to ride abroad; could see her hurried secret visit one night, to thrust her jewel-case into his hands; and could watch him sitting in his cell, night after night, working at the changing of the jewels into glass, and then, in the lost, unknown church of St Ethelwyn's well, burying the rubies and sapphires and emeralds, and marking the place with her name. Jen added various details from her own imagination, but read from the book at all important points, so that no one could contradict her. And Joan, who had grave doubts as to whether any woman, even Lady Jehane from the Hall, would have been allowed on the cloister garth in those days, had not the heart to correct her, nor hint that Jehane might have had to go to the church by the front door, as the ordinary public would have done.

'It would have been too cruel to spoil her picture!' she laughed to her mother afterwards. 'She evidently saw it all so plainly! And Jehane may have been privileged, though I doubt it! But Ambrose evidently met her somewhere. Still, I doubt if they met on the cloister garth! It would be rather too public. The abbot would have had something to say!'

A request from Dick on Sunday morning that he might walk down to the village in the afternoon was granted by Miss Macey after some hesitation. There seemed no harm in it, and

he had really given no trouble so far; indeed, he had been much quieter than she had expected—and she did not know him well enough to take alarm from the fact and deduce that he was ‘up to something on the quiet,’ as Della would have said. Probably, she thought, he was overawed by the number of girls, and he obviously felt very much out of place. He kept to himself, and did not show any signs of making friends, but loafed about alone, still rather sulky and scornful. There were no books in the house which seemed to appeal to him; evidently he was not much of a reader. She asked if he wished his sister to go with him, but Dick’s casual, ‘No, thanks. She’s too gone on those other kids. I’m fed up with her. I’d sooner go alone. We had a bit of a breeze again this morning,’ disposed of that idea. Glad to hear that Della, at least, was making friends, Miss Macey gave him leave to go for his walk, not seeing that any harm could come of it.

So Dick strolled away after dinner, airily informing Jack and Della, Nesta and Jen, that he was ‘going for a walk on his own,’ whistled over Mrs Clarke’s fence for Micky, and made his wishes known when they were safely in hiding behind the bee-hives.

‘Can you come to-night?’ he demanded. ‘I don’t want to go quite alone; it would be a mad thing to do! If I had any accident and sprained an ankle, or anything, I’d never be found, for no one knows of the place, and I should starve to death! There must be two of us. Besides, you’d like to see if there’s really anything hidden.’

‘Sure it be same place?’ Micky asked doubtfully, not over keen to go down into the depths again.

‘Certain sure. Why, they even spoke about the well! And the name on the wall’s the one they’re all talking about! Oh, it’s the place right enough! But not one of them has a notion it’s still there, under their very noses. They think it was pulled down hundreds of years ago. Meet me to-night at the same place, Mick.’

‘Nay, not this night,’ Micky said swiftly. ‘Can’t be done. I can’t get out this night. Tomorrow do?’

‘Why not? You managed it before,’ Dick said impatiently.

‘Ay, but I were in my own bed that night. A chap’s stopping here for week-end, and he has my room. I be sleepin’ on mattress in room wi’ granfer an’ granma, same as I did when you was here. ’Tain’t no use, Master Dick; it can’t be done. But next night he’ll be gone. I could come then.’

‘Bother the chap! I can’t wait!’ Dick said wrathfully. ‘I’m thinking about nothing else, as it is.’

But Micky was resolute. Monday night was the earliest it would be safe for him to try to get out at night. He had not been missed on Friday night, nor suspected the next morning, though his grandmother had remarked on his unusual sleepiness on Saturday; but to attempt to get out of the room he must share with them would have been impossible.

Dick saw this, and realised that patience, though difficult, would be better than rousing curiosity in Micky’s doings. He gave way reluctantly, and waited throughout Monday with extreme though suppressed impatience, which made him restless and irritable and very difficult to live with.

However, the girls had found a new interest by Monday, and could afford to ignore Dick. Joan looked up from a letter at breakfast-time with eager eyes. She glanced round the big table, then hammered with her spoon for silence and sprang on to her chair.

‘Speech from Her Majesty! The throne is now occupied! Silence, all!’ Joy proclaimed.

‘Girls! Hamlets and others! I have the pleasure of telling you that to-night there will be a President’s meeting of the Club, followed by a full-dress dance—not robes and crowns for the Queens, of course; I don’t mean that! But dancing frocks will be worn, not gowns. It is rather soon after Friday night, I know; but Cicely’s going away next week, and she asked me to make it as soon as possible. We talked it over on Wednesday, when Joy and I went to Broadway End to plan things with the other Queens; they weren’t sure which night would suit them all, so they were to decide and let me know. Cicely says to-night; Miss Macey promised it should be whatever night they could all come.’

‘And are they all coming, Joan? Mirry and Marguerite as well? How simply topping!’ cried one of the elder boarders joyfully.

‘But isn’t it too far? Can they get home again? Won’t we have to stop awfully early?’ another asked. ‘It’s miles to Cicely’s, and frightfully lonely roads. Can they ride all that way alone at night?’

‘It will have to be early, of course, because of all the day-girls. We can’t cut them out of meetings, you know; Edna and Peggy would never forgive us! That practice dance was different; but they must all come to this. We must have our maids of honour—Carry and Muriel as well as Edna and Peggy, you know! Miss Macey says we’ll get our prep. done in the afternoon, and then have two teas, visitors first, of course, and boarders last! Then we’ll have the meeting and dancing, and stop by eight, at the latest. That will give us heaps of time, and they’ll keep one another company on the way home, as they do when we meet at school.’

‘Oh, well, I didn’t know all the lot were going to stop. That makes a difference, of course.’

‘Cicely’s sending round notices to the day-girls,’ Joan added. ‘She had to give notice of the meeting, of course, so she said she’d write to them at the same time that she wrote to me. So they’ll tell their folks they’ll be home late, and they’ll bring their shoes and things with them.’

‘Is Miss Lane coming?’

‘Oh, rather! We must have the fiddle. Yes, she’ll be here. She and the three Queens are going to stay the night,’ Joan explained casually, with dancing eyes and a merry meaning look at Joy. ‘Yes, it will be a tight fit, but we’ll manage it somehow.’

‘Some squash! I thought we were overcrowded as it is!’ Jen murmured to Nesta.

‘Cicely and Miriam are going to sleep in the abbey,’ Joan continued. ‘Cicely says she’s been dying to sleep there ever since she first saw it, but she must have Mirry too, for fear of ghosts. So the caretaker is going to put them up. We’ll squeeze together a little more, and spare a room for Marguerite and Miss Lane; it’s only for one night.’

‘I don’t understand!’ Jen caught Joan, as the girls streamed out into the garden, discussing the news with much excitement, all evidently overjoyed at thought of a visit from these three seniors, who had left school nearly a year ago and were only occasionally seen now. Jen had heard much of Cicely and Miriam and Marguerite, and understood that they had been the ones to establish the Hamlet Club, start the dancing, and teach the rest. Cicely, she knew, was the President, but all three in turn had been Queens, Joy being the fourth Queen and Marguerite’s successor. She had seen them at Joan’s Coronation, but only in the distance; she knew they were all favourites, and that idea was confirmed by the excitement caused by Joan’s news.

Joan laughed, and drew her into the library alone. ‘Jenny-Wren, there’s more in this than meets the eye! But the rest is a secret, known only to Joy and me, and mother and Miss Macey. And we’re thinking of letting you into it! You, Jenny-Wren!’

‘Oh!’ Jen breathed, gazing at her with shining eyes. ‘Oh, but why, Joan? How simply tophole! But why should you? And what is the secret?’

‘First of all, what don’t you understand?’

‘What is a President’s meeting?’

‘One at which the President is present, of course—an official proper meeting. Now that she’s left school, she can’t come to every dance evening, so we practise and learn new dances without her, and she comes when she can; she says she won’t be able to come to many of the Saturday afternoon rambles, either. But now and then we must have her, for business and so on, besides wanting to see her! So we’ve decided to have President’s meetings, when she and the other Queens can come. You’ve heard of them all?—Mirry, the White Queen—Cicely, the Gold Queen, *and* the President of the Club—Marguerite, the Pink Queen?’

‘I saw them all when you were crowned,’ Jen explained eagerly. ‘Joy was the Green Queen, and you wore violet. Then is it for business to-night, as well as dancing?’

‘Both. We have to receive you, for one thing. You aren’t officially a member yet; you’ve just slipped in anyhow.’

‘Oh!’ Jen laughed. ‘But I’d far rather just slip in, please. Don’t waste time on me! Couldn’t that be enough?’

‘Oh, you must be introduced to the President! She must know her members. You needn’t be shy; she’s awfully jolly. She’s been tremendously good to *me*,’ Joan said soberly.

‘I shall like her for that, then,’ Jen said promptly.

Joan laughed. ‘And we have to read the minutes of the last meeting, and decide how to carry on the Club during the summer. Things are rather different this year, thanks to the dip., of course. But I don’t think it need make very much difference. We can still dance, and ramble on Saturday afternoons. We’ll have to take you to some of our favourite haunts; you’ve seen nothing yet but the abbey! It was when the Club came to see the abbey for the first time, on a winter ramble, and I showed them round, that I got to know the girls and Cicely, you know. It’s queer that we should be having our meetings here now! After the business we shall dance, and the rest will be allowed in to watch.’

‘Shall we have any of the same dances we had on Friday?’ Jen asked wistfully. ‘I love watching, but I love joining in still more! Couldn’t we have just one or two for me?’

‘We will, for your sake, of course. Cicely would ask what you knew, and put them in for you, if I didn’t. Oh, you shall dance a little, anyway, Jenny-Wren!’

‘But you said dancing frocks would be worn, and I haven’t got one,’ Jen said gloomily.

Joan laughed. ‘You haven’t had much time to get one, have you? Everybody will understand that. Wear a summer frock and plimsolls, and borrow a sunbonnet if you want to be a woman! You can get sandals and white stockings later.’

‘Oh, I’ve got white stockings to go with my white frock!’ Jen said happily. ‘And it’s quite loose and swingy! Will that do?’

‘So long as it’s loose and swingy, it will do beautifully,’ Joan said solemnly. ‘And now for the secret, Jenny-Wren! I don’t want you to tell anybody, even Jack or Della, till to-morrow. Then you can talk about it as much as you like.’

Jen nodded, gazing at her worshipfully. Joan went on eagerly, ‘For quite a year, Jen, I’ve been wanting something! You know how I love the abbey? And how keen I am on our folk-dancing? Well, when I lived in the abbey I used sometimes to creep out at night, at full moon, and wander among the ruins, thinking how lovely they were by moonlight. Then when I learned to dance, I had a craving for a moonlight dance on the garth. Don’t you feel it too?’ as

Jen's eyes gleamed and she gave a little breathless laugh of delight. 'I knew you would; that's partly why I'm letting you into it now. The others wouldn't understand; they'd just look on it as a joke, and they'd giggle, and call out to one another, and be noisy. They can't help it, and they wouldn't mean any harm, but they can't be quiet! Half the fascination of this will be in its weirdness; it would just be ruined with chattering going on! Well, now we've got our chance. The Queens know all about it, and they'll stop the night, and Edna and Peggy and Carry and Muriel, too, if they care to; Cicely was going to give them the chance. Of course there won't be beds for them all, so some of them are going to stop up all night, for once. We're going to meet on the garth at midnight and dance till we're tired, with Miss Lane to play for us; she's sporty and up to anything; we know she'll do it, though she may laugh! Then Ann Watson will give us supper, or early breakfast, at two in the morning or so, and they'll all cycle home as it's beginning to get light. I guess some of them will be late for school next morning, but it won't matter for once. But if Edna and Peggy choose to sleep on the floor, rather than go home, I shan't be surprised, and of course, we'll let them. They don't mind; they're used to roughing it. Carry and Muriel won't, that's quite certain!'

'It's a simply duckshious plan,' Jen sighed wistfully. 'But why did you choose those four, besides the Queens?'

'Because they're our bridesmaids—maids of honour, I mean! They're our best dancers, too. Edna is Marguerite's maid, Peggy is Cicely's, Carry is Joy's, and Muriel is mine. Bridesmaids and Queens have privileges! Mirry's maid was her little sister Babs, but she said she wouldn't bring her this time, as it was to be an all-night affair. Babs will be mad, I guess!'

'I would like to see it!' Jen sighed. 'It will be awfully pretty! If I kept as still as a mouse, in one corner all the time, couldn't you let me watch, Joan?'

'But we want you to join in!' Joan laughed. 'You see, there'll be nine of us, and we can do almost anything, in fours, or sixes, or eights, but for any longways dance we must have at least ten. So they said I'd better choose one more, and I thought I'd have you, Jenny-Wren.'

'Oh!' Jen gasped again. 'But how simply lovely of you! But why, Joan? Why me?'

'For one thing, because you're the newest member. For another, because I'm so much obliged to you for being so good to Della that she felt inclined to tell you that secret, and so we found the hidden treasure. I do feel as if we owed it to you. For a third and last reason, because I believe you'll enjoy it more thoroughly than any of the others would.'

'And enter into it in the proper way, as the rest of us will, without turning it merely into a joke,' she added in thought, but did not say it aloud.

'Oh, I will enjoy it!' Jen said fervently. 'I'll simply love it! And I will be quiet. But Jack was good to Della, too, Joan!'

'But Jack doesn't dance. And although those were all my reasons when I told Joy I should choose you, you've added another to them now, by discovering the story of Lady Jehane and her jewels. You don't know how I thank you for that. It seems to have made the whole abbey live in a new way, by putting real people and a real romance into it.'

Jen coloured in vast delight. That she, even she, could have added to Joan's pleasure in her abbey, if not to her love for it, was a wonderful and joyful thing to Jen. 'But you'd have found it out yourself as soon as you read her book,' she protested honestly.

'All the same, you found it, and you shall have the credit for it. I'm looking forward tremendously to telling Cicely the story to-night. I think I'll save it up for the garth, and when we've danced till we're tired, I'll tell them the Romance of Jehane and Ambrose while they're resting. There won't be time for it before. You see,' she laughed, 'none of those three seniors

has heard a word about the treasure chamber yet! We've all that story to tell, and the treasures and books to show. They're all keen on the abbey, Cicely and Miss Lane especially. Won't there be some excitement?'

'Won't we have a buzzy time?' But Jen's voice was full of joyful anticipation, not dread. 'But, Joan!'—and she became anxious suddenly—'will I be good enough to dance with all that lot? It would be all right with you, or Joy; you know I'm not good yet. But in a longways dance you have to go with everybody in turn. Suppose I had to dance with Cicely!'

'You will, if we do "Bonnets" or "Butterfly"! You're sure to come to her in time. But you needn't be nervous, Jen. She's as jolly as she can be. They all are. They're our best dancers; they've been at it longer than any of us, of course; but all the same, no new member need mind dancing with any of them. If only they see you're trying your best to catch on, and if they know you're enjoying the dances—and they will, if you look as you did on Friday night!—nothing else matters. If you're keen, and they can see you love it, they'll be jolly to you at once. Don't think about yourself, that's all; there's no time for that in this kind of dancing! Just have a good time, that's all you have to do!'

'I am frightfully keen, and I do love it awfully, and the thought of dancing in the abbey by moonlight, to fiddle music, is simply too gorgeous for words! As for having a good time, Friday was the most ripping thing I've known for ages! And I'm just hungry for some more of it. I want to do it all the time! But all the same, I think I shall be nervous if I find myself in the same ring or star as Cicely!' Jen confessed.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING

In spite of Joan's reassurance, Jen was inclined to be nervous when the evening came.

The meeting of the Hamlet Club was informal enough, and did not take long. She watched the eager greetings of the girls to the three former Queens, but kept in the background herself, Nesta and Molly whispering personal details of each, and telling of their election, coronation, and reign. At the meeting, she listened while minutes and reports were read, and plans for the summer were discussed. Among other items, she gathered that the school generally gave an entertainment in aid of some hospital in their town, early in the autumn term, and Joan asked for suggestions as to what form it should take this year. Last year's, it seemed, had been a demonstration of folk-dancing, given by the Club members for the benefit of the public, with items by the Musical Society; and as it was referred to, Jen saw, from the amused looks which passed between the three senior Queens and the conscious dropping of Joy's usually merry eyes, that something must have happened at that fête. Joy had been the reigning Queen at the time; had anything gone wrong? She resolved to ask Nesta afterwards. Joan looked serenely unconscious of anything lying behind, however; was she 'putting it on'? She must know anything there was to tell; but she showed no sign of it.

Various suggestions were made, and it was decided to consult the School Dramatic Society as to the possibility of giving a play. 'If they'd do *Midsummer Night's Dream*, we could supply the dances,' Cicely remarked. 'Then it wouldn't be left only to our Club. It would be better for the school,' and Miriam Honor laughed at this characteristic speech.

Joan introduced the new member, explaining that Jen had already learned several dances, made quite a good beginning at the morris step, and taken part in a practice evening. She led her up to the Queens, and first the President and then the other two shook hands with her and welcomed her cordially. Then the meeting broke up, and the guests were led away—'To be introduced to the cups and plates and goblets and books,' as Cicely said, while the girls living in the house raced away upstairs to change into their dancing frocks and shoes, taking the day-girl members of the Club with them.

It was when it came to standing at the head of the long lines facing Joan, and with Cicely and Joy next couple down the row, to open the dance with 'The Mary and Dorothy,' that Jen was nervous. She knew it had been chosen for her sake, and she was looking forward to it very greatly; but suppose she made a mistake, with Cicely standing there next to Joan! Suppose her 'set and turn single' was not up to standard, or she was late in giving her hand to Joy for the ring! Cicely had been warned privately by Joan and knew how she felt, and her eyes were kindly and encouraging; she was very pretty, with dark brown hair and eyes, quite grown up, of course, after her six months' trip to Ceylon during the winter. She wore a dancing frock of dark red, with wide white collar and cuffs; Miriam's was of a soft lavender shade, and her hair was yellow; Marguerite, in green, had very dark eyes and black hair, and she was even more graceful than the other two, though all walked and held themselves in a way which Jen, watching with eager, appreciative eyes, described vaguely to herself as 'topping.' Four years of folk-dancing, just at their growing stage, had done its work with them, and none of them could have been awkward if she had tried. Cicely had a very distinct air of authority, which made the way in which every one deferred to her seem only natural; but

it suited her, and she was as kindly towards the nervous new member as Miriam Honor herself—Mirry, who had been loved by all the juniors and still was by all who knew her, in spite of her Inter. B.A. and her reputation for scholarship.

Margia Lane, the fiddler, standing by the piano, struck up the quaint little air of 'The Mary and Dorothy,' and Jen's nervousness vanished in enjoyment, not merely her own, but everybody else's. She was very sensitive to atmosphere, and these original members of the Club were so evidently out to enjoy themselves that everybody else had to do the same. Her fear of criticism disappeared; she danced for the pleasure of it, her face radiant and excited, and Joan flashed a laughing look at Cicely as she led Jen down the middle and up again.

'She'll do,' the President whispered, as Joan took her new place on the other side of her.

Joan nodded. 'You take her on for "Bonnetts," and see how she skips! She's like thistledown. And she's "some" keen!'

'What dances do you know, kiddy?' Cicely asked, as they rested. 'I'd like one with you. "Hey, Boys"?' Oh, good! That's a fine beginning. I guess Joan's been giving you private lessons on the garth? Yes, I thought so! But I don't want "Hey, Boys"; you don't dance with your partner enough in that. I'll have you for a longways presently. What about "Bonnetts So Blue"?' I'm keen on that.'

'Oh, so am I! And it's such a topping tune!' Jen said warmly. 'But "We Won't Go Home Till Morning's" even better. I love them both!'

'We can't have both in one evening's programme, you know,' Cicely laughed. 'But we're going to have "Row Well" presently. Don't you know it yet? Oh, it's fine! You'll soon pick it up. And—here, whisper!—you'd better try all you know, for we shall have it again on the garth at midnight!'

A laughing look of understanding passed between them; nothing more had been said about the midnight dance; this was the first reference Jen had heard to it since Joan's promise of the morning, except an apparently casual remark of Joy's at tea-time—'It's going to be a gorgeous night for full moon!'

Jen had seen and understood Joan's laughing look across at her, and had herself been watching the sky, in fear lest clouds should gather before sunset. But it was a clear, still night, ideal for their purpose, and it was evident, from occasional glances she caught, that not only the Queens, but their 'bridesmaids' as well, had been warned of what was in store for them, and that all were looking forward to it intensely. If she had not been in the secret, she would have noticed nothing; but knowing what she did she understood the laughing, meaning look Miriam Honor gave her when she invited her to be her partner for 'Gathering Peascods,' and what was in Edna's mind when she came up to 'bag her for "Sellenger's Round." 'We shall dance all these again presently,' Edna whispered, as they armed together, for Jen had watched the dance on Friday night and had grasped it very quickly. 'It's jolly good practice for you! Now honour the centre again; never forget that. It's *the* bit of the dance! Peg wants you for something, too. What can you do?'

'I know mostly those for four. They taught me last week, before the rest of you came. They tried to teach me morris too, but I couldn't keep my hands and feet straight both at once.'

Edna laughed. 'Oh, you will, in time. I remember what an idiot I felt when I started. But it's a tophole feeling once you do get it.'

'I'd like a dance, Jen,' and Marguerite smiled down at her, for she too had been watching the new member's enjoyment with amusement and sympathy. 'What about "Butterfly"?' Have

you promised that yet?’

Jen looked up at her with happy, grateful eyes.

‘You are ripping, all of you! I never dreamed you’d dance with me. No, I haven’t, but how can we make arches? I can’t reach up as high as you can.’

‘We’ll have to pretend; you can stand on tiptoe,’ the Strawberry Queen said gravely. ‘After all, Jen, if you have a partner of your own size to make an arch with, how *am* I to go underneath?’

Jen laughed. ‘You’ll have to be the arch by yourself, I guess. Thank you just awfully! I’d love it!’

‘What was the matter with Joy at the meeting, when they talked about that fête last autumn?’ she asked Peggy, as they danced ‘Rufty Tufty’ together.

Peggy laughed. ‘Oh, it was an awful day! Joy had had a frightful quarrel with Carry, a regular bust-up, and they hadn’t spoken to one another for ages. It was Carry’s fault, really, but everybody blamed Joy for not being willing to make it up.’

‘But Carry’s her bridesmaid! She couldn’t not speak to her maid!’ Jen remonstrated.

‘That’s what everybody said to her. But she could, and she did—didn’t speak to her, I mean; and everybody was down on both of them. That fête was the most uncomfortable business you can imagine, with Joy and Carry dressing on opposite sides of the room and not looking at one another. Ed and I had to help Joy with her crown and train, or she’d never have got them right; Carry wouldn’t lift a finger to help her; she always was a cat, of course. We were all glad when it was over. That’s what every one was thinking of.’

‘Joan didn’t look uncomfortable about it?’

‘No; she’d told Joy what she ought to do, but Joy wouldn’t do it. They don’t like to be reminded of it now.’ Peggy bowed politely in response to Jen’s little bob of a curtsy. ‘Dance that with me again later!’ she whispered, and disappeared with a laugh to claim Marguerite as her partner for ‘The Old Mole.’

‘Now, Jenny-Wren, you run away off to bed like a shot!’ Joan commanded, as the last dance ended. ‘Oh, yes! You’re to go to bed! There are four whole hours till midnight! I don’t say we’ll all go to bed, but you must. You’ll rest, whether you sleep or not. I’ll come and wake you; I promise faithfully. How long do you want to dress? Five minutes? All right! Bring a warm coat; you’ll want it when you aren’t dancing. It’s going to be a lovely night.’

‘But I’ll have to tell Jack and Della, Joan! They’ll wake, and if they don’t know what’s up they’ll ask thousands of questions and want to come too. Hadn’t I better tell them? They’ll understand it’s not a thing for everybody.’

‘I’d rather you didn’t. It might be difficult to keep them from following us. You put all the things you’re going to want to wear in one pile, Jenny-Wren, and when I wake you I’ll do it very quietly and slip out of the room with your clothes, and you can dress in my room. Then they needn’t know anything about it till the morning.’

By nine o’clock the day-girls had all had supper and been sent off in little parties by moonlight, except the four ‘bridesmaids,’ who, it was understood, were to stay for an extra chat with their Queens before they too went home. Carry and Muriel would go back to town by a late train; Edna and Peggy would cycle together most of the way; so every one supposed.

‘Don’t lose the last train, Carry!’ was the mocking good-night from one. ‘You’ll have to stop all night, if you do, and I’m sure Joy can’t spare any more beds!’

‘You wouldn’t like to have to sleep on the floor,’ another added, and Edna and Peggy laughed, as it was what they fully intended to do.

By ten o'clock, the whole school had settled to sleep, except the Queens and their maids, who still sat talking in Mrs Shirley's boudoir. Miss Macey, having given permission for Joan to have her heart's desire—'As it's only for once! Though I shouldn't have thought it was worth it myself!' she had said—went off to bed, cautioning them to lock the door carefully when they went out, and to take the key with them if they wanted to come in again before the morning. 'You must remember all those precious treasures still in my study. We can't have open doors inviting burglars to walk in,' said she.

By eleven o'clock, Joan crept up to Jen's room, found the neatly-prepared pile of clothes, quite easily seen by moonlight, and carried them all, with shoes and coat and frock, to her own room. Then she woke Jen very quietly, and had her out in the corridor before she realised she was not dreaming—for Jen had slept, and soundly, in spite of her protests. When she was really awake, Jen giggled to know how easily it had been done, and laughed again as she dressed hurriedly, at thought of Jack's disgust and Della's wrath in the morning.

Downstairs in the hall, sandwiches and a glass of milk awaited her. The elder girls had already had supper and were impatient to be gone, but they greeted her laughingly as they asked if she had had a jolly little nap.

'I *had* to go to bed!' Jen said, with dignity. 'My—er—husband and adopted daughter would have asked a million questions, if I hadn't. They wouldn't have gone to bed without me.'

'You'll give us away if you laugh like that!' Joan said warningly to Cicely and Marguerite. 'Somebody will hear us and come to see, and we don't want that. Have another sandwich, Mrs Wren!'

'Take two, or three or four, and eat them as we go through the garden,' Joy suggested.

Jen took the hint and a handful of sandwiches. 'I'm ready,' she announced. 'Thanks awfully for the milk; I was jolly hungry!'

'Come very quietly!' Joan laughed. 'I must go first with the abbey key, to open the garden gate,' and she brought the key from its nail in the housekeeper's cupboard. 'And Joy must come last to lock the front door. Don't lose your key, Joy! Now come on, everybody!'

'Next stop, The Abbey by Moonlight!' murmured Joy the irrepressible. 'Oh, I say, Joan! Couldn't we go by Underground?'

'We want to see those passages, you know,' Cicely added.

But Joan was already leading the way across the moonlit lawn. 'We'll show them to you to-morrow morning. I want to go by the tresant to-night,' she said, as she unlocked the abbey gate. 'The tunnels wouldn't fit in at all with the moonlight and the garth!'

'Madam, your slightest wish is law!' Joy said mockingly.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MOONLIGHT DANCE

Joan's secret had been well kept. Neither the boarders nor Dick suspected that the elder girls intended anything but a private chat after the dancing was over. If any whisper of their plans had got about, and especially if it had included the word 'abbey,' Dick would certainly have found out all about it, for he had been wandering about all afternoon and evening in a state of extreme restlessness, impatient for night to come, annoyed by the promise of vivid moonlight, afraid lest Micky should not turn up, excited and eager and anxious.

Was the discovery of the lost treasure to fall to him? Were the jewels of Lady Jehane to be his? Only the general interest in the doings of the Hamlet Club and the visit of the 'old girls' saved him from being noticed, when his suppressed excitement must certainly have aroused suspicion. He watched the dancing with the same air of scornful aloofness as before, and went off to bed with the rest, hoping devoutly that 'the Joan-girl' and her friends would not sit talking too late.

With his door ajar he lay and listened. Long after he had thought all must be in bed, he heard Cicely's peal of laughter at Jen's reference to her husband and daughter, and indignantly realised that the girls were still downstairs. Very soon afterwards he heard a door close gently, and supposed the last of the day-girls had gone; he did not hear the rest come upstairs, but merely thought they must have come very quietly, as so many others were sleeping all around them. For safety's sake he still lay and waited for awhile, to let them all get into bed and asleep. Then he slipped out of his room and away downstairs to repeat the adventure of Friday night, but with no misgivings this time. He knew just what to do, just how to go; surely nothing could go wrong to-night! Unless, of course, Micky did not turn up; that was his only anxiety.

He crept into the housekeeper's room and opened the cupboard. And then he had his first shock; for the key was not there. In utter dismay Dick stood and stared, then began a furious search on the shelves, on the mantelpiece, out in the hall, and in the kitchen, his anger growing with every fresh disappointment. But there was no sign of the key—very naturally, since at the moment it was lying in the pocket of Joan's coat as she danced 'Row Well, Ye Mariners,' clapping hands gaily with Peggy Gilks, on the moonlit cloister garth.

Almost ready to cry with disappointment and disgust, Dick gave it up at last, and slipped out by the pantry window and away, skirting the lawn where the shadows lay most thickly, to meet Micky and tell him he could go home.

'It's no go—all up!' he said gloomily, as Micky crept out of the bushes to meet him by the gate. 'I can't find the key. The wretched beast of a girl must have hidden it somewhere. We'll have to try again another night. Isn't it a rotten swizz?'

'They'm here,' said Micky. 'Gone through gate an hour ago—ten of 'em—ten girls. Miss Joan were there, 'n' Miss Joy, 'n' Miss Jen, 'n' lots more!'

'Here? Gone into the abbey at this time?—I say! What's that?' at sound of the thin, distant notes of a violin.

'Fiddle. One of 'em were carryin' of it. I seen her,' Micky nodded. 'None of 'em seen me, you bet!'

‘Sammy!’ whispered Dick, utterly amazed. ‘What on earth are they doing? I say, Mick! Did she lock the gate, or is it only shut?’ With dawning hope he tried the handle, and gave a suppressed whoop as it turned easily. Joan had not locked the gate behind her. ‘Come on, Micky, man! We’ll see what they’re up to first, and then we’ll get on with our own stunt. Mind you jolly well keep out of this beastly moonlight, though!’

They both took good care to do that, and crept from shadow to shadow, round the back of the abbey buildings till they reached the lilac-bush behind the chapter-house. Sliding cautiously through the window in the back wall, they crept to the chapter-house door and peered round the corner to watch the girls on the garth, much disgusted and alarmed to find the moonlight shining full upon them. Dick had forgotten that the chapter-house faced south! He whispered a caution to Micky, but the dancing girls were too busy, and the watchers too enthralled, to notice them.

‘Newcastle’ was in progress, Jen and Peggy Gilks sitting out, watching eagerly from the ruined wall of the cloisters, where Margia Lane stood fiddling. They had found the grass of the garth, though very short, damper with dew than they had expected, and Cicely had peremptorily forbidden any one to sit down, except on the stone steps or broken walls. As the boys watched from the chapter-house and the girls from the cloisters, the eight dancers formed stars in the centre or skipped round, ‘honoured their partners’ and passed on to find new ones, skipped through arches and fell back in long lines, and finally bowed and curtseyed as the original couples met at the end.



The eight dancers formed stars in the centre.

‘That’s fine, Margia!’ Marguerite cried. ‘Would you mind playing it again? Once is never enough, you know!’

‘Care to come in instead of me, Peg?’ Joan asked.

‘No, thanks. I’d get lost in the last figure. I never do know where I am.’

‘But it’s awfully pretty!’ Jen added. ‘I’m jolly glad you started this dancing!’ she said fervently to Cicely Hobart.

‘So are lots of us—jolly glad!’ Joy laughed. ‘We’ll put up a statue to her in the school hall, shall we, Jenny-Wren?’

‘Oh, don’t trouble! Just keep them dancing; that’s all I want. But see they do it properly; I hate to see the dances messed up. It hurts me every time,’ Cicely said seriously. ‘They’re waiting for us, Joy. I’ll be woman this time. Come on!’

The girls caught hands and ran to the centre in a ring, throwing up their arms, and with a grunt of scorn Dick drew Micky away. ‘Come on, man! We’ve got work to do! This is piffle! We can’t waste time here!’

They dived into the secret passage and made their way into the crypt, and Dick’s torch flashed at once on that mysterious ‘JEHANE III’ on the wall.

‘It can’t be Jehane the Third!’ he argued, ‘but it must be three; she couldn’t be a hundred and eleven! She wasn’t, anyway; they say she was quite a kid! Three what, then? What did he mean by it?’

‘If ’twere a water-plug in road, ’twould be three feet away,’ Micky suggested.

Dick saw the point at once. ‘We ought to have brought a measure. How mad! We’ll have to guess. Three feet would be a yard.’

‘Might not be feet, though,’ Micky pointed out. ‘Might be three yards, or three paces, or three stones—three of them big blocks.’

Dick agreed gloomily. ‘We’ll have to tear the whole place up. Why couldn’t the silly ass say what he meant by it? All the same, we aren’t going to be done, Mick. We’ve found the old church—there’s the well to prove it!—and the very place, with her name, and all. We’re jolly well not going to give up till we’ve got the jewels, too. We’ll try three feet first; ’tishn’t likely to be three inches! About how much is a yard?’

Between them they decided, after some controversy, on an ‘outside and inside’ measurement of a yard, as Dick said—one probably too big, the other as probably too small. With a bit of soft chalky stone, Dick marked out two circles, with Jehane’s name as the centre, and the circumference at the distance of their rather doubtful measurements.

‘Must be somewhere in the wall, between those two, if it’s three feet from her name,’ he said. ‘If that’s no go, we’ll try three feet, and then three paces, from the wall across the floor. It might be under the floor, or in the wall, seems to me. You tap the stone between those circles, man, and see if it sounds hollow anywhere. That’s how the carroty-girl found the way into the secret passage,’ and he set to work himself to show Micky how to do it.

They worked hard for a long time, testing every inch of the stone, but without result. No hollow sound rewarded their blows, and Dick’s exasperation grew as their failure seemed certain.

Up on the garth the girls were still dancing. The simpler longways dances, in which Jen could take part, alternated with more elaborate sets of six or eight, which she watched with great enjoyment, and also with keen appreciation, though she could not have put it into words, of the strangeness of the scene—the silence, broken only by the quaint Old English music from Miss Lane’s fiddle, or the occasional cry of an astonished owl, or a laugh from one of the dancers—the beautiful high windows of the refectory above, and the broken but still beautiful arches below, the old windows and doorways, the intense white light and black shadows—the

weird quietness of this dancing on the velvet turf, with none of the tapping of the feet she was used to in the hall—the light-coloured frocks and white feet and hoods of the dancing girls. She felt it all in her own way as deeply as Joan, though to her it was a new and strange experience, while Joan had dreamed of it for long.

Joan, skipping round in the heys and cast-off of ‘The Old Mole,’ glanced at her rapt face and felt justified in her choice of Jen to fill the vacant place in their number. ‘Look at the kiddy!’ she whispered to Cicely, as they met for a moment, then parted to circle again. ‘I knew she’d enter into it tremendously.’

Cicely nodded. ‘She’ll do,’ she said again, as she curtseyed in reply to Joan’s polite bow.

The country dances gave place after a time to morris, when six at a time the elder girls danced with tapping staves or waving handkerchiefs, and again Jen watched enthralled, and with more appreciation now that she understood the difficulty of the movements. Then, two at a time, while the others rested on the steps of the refectory stairs, they danced morris jigs, and Joan and Joy, exchanging a laughing look, took their places for a minuet.

‘We simply must, for old times’ sake!’ Joan said. ‘But for our minuet we might none of us be here now! But after this we’ll have supper!’—and presently Mrs Watson brought out coffee, and more sandwiches and cakes, and warm milk for Jen, rather to her indignation.

‘Aren’t I old enough to have coffee, too?’ she demanded.

‘Not at one a.m., Jenny-Wren,’ Miriam laughed.

‘But it couldn’t make me any wide-awaker’n I am already!’

‘Have a sandwich, and be thankful for your blessings, my dear infant!’ Cicely retorted, and Jen subsided, remembering Jack and Della and Nesta asleep in bed.

Following supper—for which Joan invited them all into her little room, but which they all preferred to take out in the cloisters overlooking the moonlit garth and sitting on chairs and cushions—Joan told the romance of Jehane and Ambrose, as she had promised, and held them all fascinated with the story. Then Cicely called on Miriam to sing, as she was always expected to do on dance-evenings, and to a low accompaniment from the violin she sang ‘The Lover’s Tasks,’ with its quaint refrain—‘Sing Ivy Leaf, Sweet William and Thyme’; and by special request of Joy, ‘The Bonny Blue Bell’—‘I will be married on a Tuesday morning.’

Then they turned to dancing again, Jen taking part, ‘to get warmed up,’ in several dances for four and another longways set. And so at last it was after two o’clock, and all agreed that they felt a little tired and ready to rest.

Edna and Peggy accepted gleefully Joan’s invitation to sleep in the big arm-chairs in her abbey room, but Muriel and Carry were anxious to get home, so Miss Lane offered to ride with them as far as the town, her own home being on the hills just beyond. Cicely and Miriam were to have a bed in Mrs Watson’s rooms, so only Marguerite remained to be put up at the Hall.

‘You might take me back by the secret passage!’ she urged. ‘I’m longing to see it, and I ought to hurry away in the morning.’

‘Joy can take you that way, if she likes, but I must go by the tresaut to lock the garden gate,’ said Joan. ‘Jen, you’d better come with me; it will be quicker.’

‘But Mirry and I want to see the passage, too!’ Cicely remonstrated. ‘Can’t we all go, and then she and I will come back through the gate to go to bed?’

‘Well, don’t be too long, for I’ll have to wait for you at the gate.’ They were standing by the lilac-bush as Joan spoke, Joy and Marguerite already half-way down the stair. ‘Come on, Jen, the sooner you’re in bed the better. Joy!’ Joan called after her down the stair. ‘I’m going

to close this door. It oughtn't to be left standing open. So don't forget and try to come this way, for you won't be able to get out. It only opens by the spring those children found, you know.'

'Right-o!' Joy said cheerfully, and led her party through the tunnel by the light of her torch. 'Don't fall over the edge of the steps, Mirry! I don't know why they didn't build them all the way across. Silly business, I call it, to leave a space like that!'

In the hollow below the steps, as she spoke, the two small boys lay breathless with horror. They had worked hard, with no success; had measured three feet from the wall below Jehane's name and tried to dig up the great stone blocks. Dick's knife, a good one, had broken as he scraped at the rubbish between the stones, and in disgust he had flung it into the empty well of St Ethelwyn, and repented of the foolish act a moment later; but by this time his nerves were all on edge with disappointment and overtiredness, and, like Della in the same state, he had hardly known what he was doing. At last, and most unwillingly, they had decided that without proper tools they could do no more, and that they must come back armed with spade, trowel, and, if possible, a pickaxe, which Micky must 'borrow' from his grandfather's tool-shed.

Suddenly the danger of their position occurred to Dick; he had never thought of it till that moment. 'I say, Mick, it's two o'clock! We'd jolly well better clear out! I clean forgot we hadn't got the key! Those girls have got it somewhere, and if they go first and lock the gate _____,

There was no need to finish the sentence. With one accord they made for the staircase; then stopped in petrified horror at sound of laughter and the voices of the girls as they started to come down.

'We're done in this time!' Dick groaned, and warned Micky into silence with a fierce grip of his arm, switching off both their torches just in time. In silence, and darkness, and deepest anxiety, they heard Joan's cheerful promise that she would wait at the garden gate for the others, and knew their retreat was cut off. The final blow was her announcement that she would close the tunnel door on the outside.

Micky began to sniff. Dick, biting his lips to keep them steady, whispered gloomily, 'That does it! That's the limit! We can't get out any way! We're in a beastly hole, Micky, old man, and that's the truth!'

CHAPTER XXVIII ST ETHELWYN'S WELL

Micky knew it all too well. Almost before the girls were out of hearing, he broke into frightened sobbing.

Dick caught him by the arm and dragged him back into the crypt, and switched on his torch again. 'Don't be an idiot, Mick!' he said indignantly. 'We can get out all right, you silly ass, and any old time we want to. But it jolly well means giving ourselves away, and there won't half be a row!'

'How can we?' Micky sniffed.

'Don't be a donk! We've only got to follow them and yell through any of those holes in the wall, till somebody hears and lets us out. I'll make them hear *me*, as soon as I want to! So don't go howling as if you thought you were shut up here for life!'

That was precisely what Micky had thought. If they were not doomed to slow starvation, things were not quite so bad, though still bad enough. He realised just what kind of a 'row' there was likely to be when their doings were discovered, and if release entailed a full confession, it was not an attractive prospect. He whimpered again, and wished he had never come.

Dick turned on him sharply. 'That's no good, man. Don't be a rotter! There's nothing to howl about. We've got to think what we'll do now. And you've got to listen to me!'

That was obvious. Micky certainly had no ideas of his own at the moment. Dick continued forcefully, 'Question is, how much have we got to give away? And can we do any more before we go? For we won't get another chance, that's quite certain; and those jewels must be here somewhere. Oh, it is rotten luck! It's awfully hard lines!' he groaned. 'To think nobody knows of this place but us, and we've found the very spot, and yet we can't get at them! They'll come with men and tools, and tear the whole floor up, and find everything! They just *shan't*, that's all! Even if we can't get the jewels ourselves, I won't make a present of them to those girls! See here, Mick! All we've got to say is that we were exploring the tunnels; say I was showing them to you! They'll put the blame on me, anyway; you needn't worry. But, on your life, man, don't breathe a word about this old church! Don't give it away to a single soul! See? Serves 'em jolly well right!' he said bitterly. 'But we'll have one more try for the jewels before we go, since we *are* stuck here and aren't likely to come back. Besides, there's the other way out!' he added, with dawning hope. 'We might get out into the woods! I don't believe they've had time to block that door up yet, though I heard 'em say they were going to. I say, Mick! If we could get out that way, you could get home all right, and no one would ask you any questions!'

Micky listened hopefully. He was most extremely anxious to be asked no questions. But he was not more anxious to escape questioning than Dick was eager that he should, for Dick felt privately very much afraid, if not convinced, that Micky would lose his head under cross-examination and 'give the whole show right away.'

'Where be t'other door, Master Dick?' Micky asked anxiously.

'Along that passage where the girls went, till you come to a corner. Then you turn to the left; right goes straight to the house; remember that! You have to climb over heaps of stone and stuff, and it's miles long, but in the end you come to steps, hundreds of them, and at the

top you're out in the woods. We'll try it, anyway. If we could get out, perhaps I could slip in through the garden and pantry window, after all!' His eyes gleamed hopefully. All was not yet lost. 'But we'll have one more shot at the jewels. What an ass I was to chuck that knife away! It was better than nothing. It was all we had, anyway. I wonder if I could get at it?' and he peered into the ancient well, flashing his torch from side to side.

'You be careful, Master Dick!' Micky warned him nervously.

'I say! Here's a bit of luck! It's caught in the side. I believe I can reach it. That's our first bit of luck to-night,' Dick said resentfully, ignoring the fact that they might very well have met the girls face to face on the steps if they had decided to go home a few seconds earlier; and forgetting, too, the fact of the open garden gate.

'Don't you fall in, Master Dick!' Micky quavered, in an agony of distress, as Dick leaned far into the old well in his efforts to reach the knife.

'No jolly old fear! You can hang on to my legs, if you like.'

Then a wild scream rang through the crypt. Perhaps Dick leaned too far; perhaps Micky was clumsy and knocked against him instead of seizing his ankles—that was the version Dick always preferred to believe. His position had been most risky, and now he over-balanced and fell. With a shriek of dismay, he clutched at the side, but his fingers slid off the smooth stone, and with a groan he lay helpless at the bottom.

It was only ten feet deep, but the sides were smooth, and Micky, sobbing with fright, could find no way to get down to help him. And as soon as Dick could recover his scattered senses and think at all, he was conscious of such acute pain in his right leg, which lay doubled beneath him, that he knew he could not climb. Whether it was broken or not, he had not knowledge enough to tell, but he had never known pain like it, and for some minutes he could only lie huddled up, catching his breath in gasping sobs.

Micky, in agony, hung over the edge and called to him. Then, terror-stricken when no answer came, he turned and fled. Master Dick was dead!—at least, he was dying. Micky could hear that for himself. In absolute horror he ran from the place.

It was instinct more than thought that led him to remember and act upon those words of Dick's describing the upper passage. The thought of going to the house and giving the alarm never once occurred to him. Believing firmly that Dick was dead, his only idea was to get away as quickly as he could and as far as possible, and to say nothing to anybody. Dick, in his place, would have realised the need to go for help, whether his companion was dead or not; but Dick, though careless and unscrupulous, had a certain background of education and training which would have guided his instinct rightly in this crisis and saved him from such utter collapse. Micky had none and was only twelve, and he was terrified. Sobbing with panic and horror, he fled down the passage, turned swiftly to the left, and began the long, toilsome scramble to the woods, crying all the time.

Lying alone in the dark, Dick was at first conscious only of pain; then, that he could not move his leg, and that the thought of being hauled somehow out of the well and carried upstairs was too horrible to contemplate.

But at last it dawned on him that everything was very quiet. 'Micky!' he called anxiously. Then in wakening terror, '*Micky!* Where are you, old man? I say, *Mick!*'

When no answer came, Dick clenched his hands to force himself to forget the pain and to think clearly. Of course Micky had gone for help! He could not get into the abbey, it was true, but he knew the way to the house. Dick was sure he had described it plainly, certain Micky had understood. Surely he would have no difficulty in making himself heard? The girls could

not have gone to bed yet—certainly not Joan, who had to wait for the others at the garden gate. They would be sure to hear Micky's calls, and help would come before long.

Dick steeled himself to bear the pain just for a few minutes longer, but it was very difficult to be brave all alone in the dark. His torch had of course fallen from his hand as he clutched at the side of the well; he groped about, and to his joy found it; to his great relief it was not broken, and he promptly switched it on and felt better, though there was nothing to see but the smooth sides of the well. Still, it was better than the solid, crushing darkness, which had felt as if it must stifle him. How long would it be before help came? He was not sure how long the torch would last; it had had a good deal of use already in these two nights of exploration; and Della's had been lent to Micky. But that could not matter now; they were sure to come long before it gave out. He thought they could almost have been here by now; and he strained his ears to listen for voices and footsteps; then covered them with his hands because the silence was as crushing as the blackness had been.

At first he had no doubt that Micky had gone for help. Any fellow would, of course. But time passed, and no one came. He comforted himself, and stifled a dawning horrible fear, with memories of stories he had read, in which a time of waiting such as this seemed hours long, but proved invariably to have been only a matter of minutes. That always happened in books. Perhaps he had only lain here for about a quarter of an hour, though it seemed a week.

He felt for his watch, and found it still going, for he had fallen upon that unfortunate leg, and the watch in his pocket had not suffered. The ticking was better than the silence, anyway; he would keep it in his hand and listen to it after this; what a row it made! He looked at it—half-past three! He must have fallen soon after two, he knew. *Half-past three!* An hour and a half! Could his fall have jerked the small hand forward an hour? Could any one take an hour and a half to come from the Hall? Ten minutes would be enough, as Dick knew well. Could Micky not make himself heard?

Suddenly Dick grew very cold, and began to shake all over. Suppose Micky had not gone for help! Could he be such a little bounder? Suppose he had been seized with panic and run away? Suppose he was afraid to tell? Dick remembered with an awful dread how acute had been Micky's fear of discovery. But surely he would not think of himself now? It wouldn't be decent! No chap would do a thing like that!

Words of Della's, quoted from Jen, flashed into his mind. 'You have to be decent. People must be able to trust you. You must be straight. There are things no decent people would do!' And he had laughed.

But it was true. There were things no decent fellow would do. And this was one of them. But was Micky straight? And Dick knew suddenly that he, who had cared nothing that his own actions should be honest and straightforward, was dependent now for his very life on the doubtful honesty of a boy younger than himself and of much more doubtful training. For if Micky did not tell, what then?

It was unthinkable, and yet so horribly plain. They would miss him in the morning, of course; even for that there seemed endless hours to wait! They would find his room empty, and then they would search. But Joy would be able to say she had been in the abbey tunnel during the night and had seen nothing of him; Dick's brain was working with fearful clearness now, in spite of his pain. They would search the garden and the abbey, and might possibly explore the upper passage to the woods, but they would say it was only waste of time to come this way again. And no one in the whole world knew of the underground church but himself and Micky! *No one in the whole world!*

No shout of his could be heard above ground, or in the upper passage; or Joan or Joy must have heard the shriek with which he fell. What was to happen, then, unless Micky told? And the horrible conviction was growing that Micky would not tell.

Up to this point Dick had thought clearly, but now he came to a sudden stop. He dared not go further. But he shivered, and wished Della had been there, and wondered why he was so very cold.

If Micky never told! If he even did not tell for a week—or a few days! How long did it take to die of starvation? Dick wondered if he were really hungry already, or if he were only imagining it. But it was nearly four o'clock, and supper had been at eight, and he had been hard at work much of the time in between. And there had been no coffee and sandwiches for him. He *was* hungry already! How would he feel by this evening? He began to feel sick at the very thought.

If only he could trust Micky to do the straight thing! Fancy it mattering so much whether one small boy was 'decent' or not! Dick found that his ideas of what mattered had changed a good deal during the last hour. They were to change a good deal more yet. The horror of those long hours alone in the dark, in that unknown spot, tormented by pain and hunger and the certain knowledge that Micky had not told, or help must have come long ago, remained with him for years, and pulled him up many a time when the temptation to be not quite straight in his actions came to him. It came often, for it was in his nature and could only be conquered by long struggle; but as soon as it came, Dick saw again the smooth, impossible sides of St Ethelwyn's well, heard the incredibly loud ticking of his watch, and lived again through those endless hours of desperate fear.

How long would it take? How long would his torch last? He turned it off to save it, but the darkness was too appalling in his overwrought state, and he hastily switched it on again. If he had to endure the blackness later on, he would try to do so somehow, but just now he felt he could not face it.

Now and then he shouted, though without hope. But there was always the chance that some one in the abbey might hear a sound through the crack in the stones which had given him his first clue to this ghastly place. He knew the chance was scarcely a chance at all; who would be wandering round behind the chapter-house in the early morning? But at least it was doing something.

Now and then his nerves gave way, and he cried a little. Now and then he tried to say the prayers he generally forgot at bedtime. And at last they were answered, for, utterly exhausted, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIX

JOAN FINDS THE HERMIT'S CHURCH

'Jen's not awake yet!' and Della sat up in bed.

'Lazy kid!' Jack skipped across the floor and shook her better half, who was sleeping the heavy sleep of a two-o'clock-in-the-morning dancer. 'Goodness me! She is sound asleep! I can't wake her up! Jen! Have you got sleeping sickness?'

Jen gazed up at her drowsily, then turned over to go to sleep again.

But Jack would have none of it. 'No, you don't! It's time to get up! If you don't wake, I'll fetch my sponge and squeeze it down your neck. It would be beastly messy! I suppose'—scornfully—'this is what comes of your dancing!'

Jen sat up suddenly, her eyes gleaming. 'I was dancing at two o'clock this morning,' she said solemnly.

'Go on!' Jack cried, in indignant unbelief.

'In your sleep?' Della demanded incredulously. 'Dreaming, do you mean?'

'No fear! Really and truly! We finished with "We Won't Go Home Till Morning," and then "Sellenger's Round"; Joan says she likes either to begin or end with that, because it's such an absolutely topping thing. On the cloister garth, you know, by moonlight; to Miss Lane's fiddle.' Jen's eyes danced triumphantly at their mystified stare. 'And neither of you knew I had gone out! Oh, it was ripping!' and she hugged herself and rolled on the bed in glee.

Jack pounced on her. 'What d'you mean? Have you had a nightmare?'

'Nightmare? No, it was tophole; well, I mean, it was simply beautiful—all so still and silent, and those lovely old arches and windows looking down at us, and the moonlight so weird and white, and us dancing on the garth! We had everything I could join in; wasn't it ripping of them? And some topping morris as well, both dances and jigs. And they all danced with me! I never thought they would!'

'Who?' Jack demanded, incredulous still.

'All the five Queens, and their maids, and me, and Miss Lane. Joan planned it all; she's been wanting it for months! They did heaps of lovely dances I don't know, and Joan and Joy did their minuet, and Cicely and Miriam did "Princess Royal"—simply topping! And we had supper in the middle, sitting on cushions in the cloisters—coffee and cakes and sausage-rolls and sandwiches and custard and jelly; Mrs Watson had got it all ready in the afternoon.'

'Jen, you—you *pig!*' wailed Jack.

'Oh, well, you couldn't have joined in, even if you had known! I could dance lots of the things; we had some of the little ones, like "Hey, Boys," three times over. But I knew you'd feel a bit sick about being left out,' Jen conceded, 'and there were some things left over, so I asked Joan on the way home if I might have a cake for each of you. She laughed and gave me a basket with lots in it, but you're not to tell the others. It's under my bed.'

Jack dived for the basket, and found unexpected but very pleasant proof of Jen's story in a couple of sausage-rolls, a few cakes, and a varied assortment of fancy biscuits. They set to work on these at once, and Jen watched them complacently. 'I'm not a bit hungry,' she remarked.

‘But how did you get out without waking us?’ Jack demanded, in an injured tone. ‘How could you dress so quietly, and all in the dark? I don’t believe you put the light on without waking us!’

‘No, I didn’t dress here at all,’ and Jen explained Joan’s plan.

Jack did not feel quite so bad when she understood. ‘I couldn’t believe you’d dressed without waking us! Of course, if you sneaked out like that——!’ said she.

‘I’m going to give Dick a cake and some of my biscuits,’ Della said suddenly. ‘I’ll tell him not to say where they came from.’

She had been very quiet while Jen was telling her story, and now, in answer to her adopted mother’s inquiry, she said briefly, ‘We were scrapping again last night, while you were dancing in the hall. He was awfully—awfully queer!’ She knew no other way to describe Dick’s restless excited state of the night before. Her face clouded as she went on. ‘He keeps on saying I’m getting so frightfully good, and it makes me mad. I hate it; I don’t want to be good. But the things we used to do seem silly now, somehow. I don’t know why it is!’ she sighed.

Jen began to dress, and explained the situation, as she understood it, while she did so. ‘You’re getting some sense, that’s all, and he hasn’t begun to get any yet. Don’t be mad! I’m only telling you what I think. You two used to go on like crazy lunatics, doing just what came into your heads, and never thinking what would come of it. That kind of thing’s not *done*, you know! It’s mad, and ordinary people aren’t like that. You never worried about what people thought. But now you’re living with people—lots of people!—who’ve got sense, and who don’t do mad things, and who know they’ve got work to get through, and know that things matter, and it’s made you see how daft you used to be. That’s what I think is the matter with you and Dick. You’re thirteen, aren’t you? Well, you’re beginning to grow up. You haven’t got very far yet, of course,’ as Jack snorted derisively. ‘Don’t make those vulgar noises, Jacky-boy! I know what I mean, if you don’t; and I’m trying to say it so that she’ll understand. ’Tisn’t so awfully easy! Della, you’re beginning to see how sensible people look at things, that’s all. Perhaps in time you’ll even be sensible yourself. But that’s not being “good”—not as you and Dick mean it. It’s only behaving like a reasonable creature. You didn’t before you came here, you know!’

‘Dick doesn’t think it’s only that,’ Della said, much subdued.

‘He hasn’t got there yet, but he will; at least, I hope to goodness he will, for your sake! He’ll be a horror when he grows up, if he doesn’t. He’ll have to get sense sometime. Don’t you worry about being “good,” Della Jessop. Neither you nor Dick’s in any danger of it yet!’ and Jen brushed out her hair with much vigour.

Not looking quite convinced, for Dick’s gibes at her alleged reformation had hurt her deeply, Della dressed soberly, and slipped out of the room to take her peace-offering to Dick. She was back in two minutes, looking troubled. ‘He isn’t in his room,’ she said doubtfully.

‘He must have got up early and gone out into the garden,’ Jen said practically, quite callous as to Dick’s safety.

‘He—he hasn’t been to bed,’ Della faltered. ‘The bed’s still made.’

‘Oh?’ Jen and Jack looked at her sharply.

‘You don’t know where he’s gone? You’re sure you don’t know anything about it?’ Jack demanded.

‘No, she doesn’t.’ Jen could see that in Della’s face. ‘Don’t worry, kid! He’s been having a night out somewhere. It won’t hurt him; it was a gorgeous night. Perhaps the full moon went

to his head; it rather did to ours! And anyway, *we* can't talk, after last night. But we didn't do it on the quiet. Dick's rather an idiot, you know.'

'Oh, yes, you *did!*' Jack said resentfully.

Jen laughed. 'Sorry, old thing! But I had to go when I was invited. But I'm sorry you feel so rotten about it. I mean, we didn't do it on the sly; Miss Macey and Mrs Shirley knew.'

'What shall I do?' Della asked doubtfully.

'Eat the rest of those biscuits! He doesn't deserve them. I'll help you!' Jack suggested.

'Don't do anything,' Jen advised. 'You don't want to give Dick away, I suppose? No, I thought not. They'll find out he's missing at breakfast time; half an hour won't make any difference. Perhaps he's hoping to slip in again before we get down, and tumble up his bed a bit to make it look slept in. You wouldn't like it if you'd told on him and spoiled his chance. If he turns up as usual at breakfast, we'll all go for him afterwards and make him tell us what he's been up to.'

But Dick was lying at the bottom of St Ethelwyn's well in the ancient church, and before breakfast was over the whole school knew that he was missing and had been out all night. Della was questioned severely, being not unnaturally looked upon as a probable confederate, but her answers, and the evidence of Jen and Jack, cleared her character, and her obvious anxiety was shared by Miss Macey, though she tried to conceal it.

'Bother the boy!' grumbled Joy, in amused indignation. 'He's quite put *our* little doings into the shade! I thought we'd give everybody something to talk about this morning, when they heard about last night, but instead of that it's all Dick—Dick—Dick! It's mean!' And the interest of the rest of the girls was at least divided between the moonlight dance and the missing black sheep.

All sorts of conjectures were made, many of them very wild; the favourite was, of course, that he had run away, being 'fed up' with so many girls. But he would not go to any of the aunts or uncles in London, Della was sure of that; so the general idea was that he would try to walk to Southampton or Portsmouth and go to sea as a cabin-boy.

'I jolly well wish he would!' Joy said fervently. 'It would do him tons of good!'

But Della broke down and cried at the thought. 'I *know* mother wouldn't like it!' she sobbed.

'I don't suppose she would,' Joy said grimly. 'Pity Dick didn't think of that!'

'It's just as I said,' Jen pointed out to Della. 'You have to think, or you go and do all kinds of mad things. You can see for yourself what a crazy lunatic Dick is!'

There was no sign of him by nine o'clock, so the girls were sent to classes as usual, retailing the double events of the night to the day-girls as they arrived.

'Mercy on us!' said Carry's friend Agnes. 'More excitements? It's positively thrilling to come to school since you lot came to live here! We never know what will have happened! There's something new every morning, very nearly!'

'Well, not quite!' laughed Edna, coming in from the abbey in her school tunic, having changed and breakfasted in Mrs Watson's rooms. 'Dick run away? Good riddance, I say!' when she heard the latest sensation.

'Dancing at two o'clock in the abbey? How mad! But how like Joan Shirley!' commented Agnes.

'Not at all; it was topping! Sour grapes, Agnes! You'd have stopped if you'd been asked, and it wouldn't have been mad then!' Peggy teased.

'I'm sure I shouldn't! I call it a crazy business!'

'She wouldn't, Peg. She never was a sport,' Edna said lightly. Peggy nodded, and turned to assure Joan that they had slept 'rippingly' and been awfully comfortable. 'Carry and Muriel will be late to-day, I guess,' she laughed. 'It was awfully good of you to let us stop! We enjoyed every minute—the dancing, and the supper, and the easy-chairs, and the ghosts, and all!'

'There weren't any ghosts, though. I'm quite disappointed,' and Cicely joined them. 'Mirry and I slept like tops. What's all this? Somebody missing? The small boy? I say, I'll be a search party! I'm in no hurry this morning. He can't have gone far, surely. He looked sulky enough for anything last night!'

While classes began in the various rooms, Miss Macey, Joan, and Joy, with Cicely, Miriam, and Marguerite, began a thorough search of the house, garden, and abbey. Dick's forebodings were justified, however, and they decided unanimously that there was no need to go along the underground passage to the chapter-house.

Greatly interested to see it for themselves, the seniors were led along the upper tunnel to the door to the woods, but found no trace of the fugitive, nor even of Micky's hurried exit in the night. While Joy led them here, Miss Macey and Joan, much distressed by this time, had gone down to the village to ask if any one had seen the boy, and this inquiry met with more success. Dick was known in the village, of course, from his brief stay at Mrs Clarke's with Della. Miss Macey's questions soon brought out the fact of his recent visits to Micky and long talks with him in the garden, and she saw at once that Micky, not Della, was Dick's confederate now. She demanded Micky, and he was brought in from the garden, his grandmother explaining that he had not seemed well that morning, so she had not sent him to school. He had eaten no breakfast, and had not 'seemed hisself at all.'

Micky, when he came, certainly did not look well. He was still in a state of extreme nervous terror, which the sight of Miss Macey, whom he knew, only increased. He collapsed in tears when questioned, and shook and sobbed and gave incoherent answers which nearly drove the anxious questioners crazy. At last, after a long time and some very severe scolding, he managed to gasp out a statement that 'Master Dick was dead—fell down well in old church'—and Joan turned an utterly incredulous face to Miss Macey.

St Ethelwyn's well? The old church? What wild, mad story was this? Surely the thing was utterly impossible? The old hermit's lost church? The magic healing well?

Miss Macey was thinking of Dick, however, and her face was white as she insisted that Micky should lead them to the spot.

'What were you doing there?' she demanded, as they set out for the abbey, Joan still looking bewildered and unbelieving, but with keen eagerness in her startled eyes, Micky sobbing all the way.

'Digging—for the jewels—that was buried,' gasped Micky, and went on to tell of the loss of Dick's knife.

But Joan did not hear. Digging for the buried jewels? The jewels of Lady Jehane? How was it possible?

Where was this 'old church,' with the well?

'And I was so proud of knowing my abbey so well!' she murmured, as led by Micky with Della's torch they entered the door behind the lilac-bush, and he showed them where to squeeze between stair and wall.

Wide-eyed and eager, Joan for the new discovery, Miss Macey on Dick's account, they followed him, and stood amazed as the crypt opened out before them.

‘Where are we?’ Joan gasped. ‘The old church! Oh, isn’t it beautiful? Isn’t it perfect? Just look at these pillars! But just think—all these centuries——’

‘Joan!’ Miss Macey said quickly, with quiet authority. ‘I know how you feel, but we must find Dick. Everything else must wait. He may be injured; I can’t believe he’s dead.’

‘I’m sorry, Miss Macey!’ Joan came to herself with a start. ‘But it all—all this—knocked me just silly for a minute. Micky!’—sharply—‘why did you bring us here? Did you say Dick is here?’

‘Fallen down a well, he said. Where is the well, Micky?’

In great fear for Dick, but still in wild amazement on Joan’s part, they followed Micky to the shadowy end of the crypt, where the arches of the four ancient pillars formed a canopy over the old well.

‘St Ethelwyn’s well!’ whispered Joan, in absolute stunned awe. ‘These pillars are Saxon, far older than anything in the abbey!’

Miss Macey stepped up on to the low platform, and peered down into the well. She gave a sharp cry of distress. ‘He’s here. We must get him out at once. How can we get help most quickly?’

‘We’ll need a rope, and a man.’ Joan forgot the crypt, the well, the Saxon arches, and the jewels, and became her practical self. ‘I’d better go. I’ll have to go by the passage; we haven’t the key of the tresant gate, so we can’t go through the garden. Will you wait with him, Miss Macey? I think one of us should stay. But I’m afraid I’ll have to take the light.’

In the bottom of the well Dick lay unconscious, his torch still lighted near his hand. Miss Macey said tensely, ‘I will stay, of course. His light is here, so we shall have two, fortunately. But I’m going down to see how much he is hurt. I can’t think he is dead. And I can’t stay here and not know. Help me, Joan! I must find out.’

Joan’s respect and liking for Miss Macey had always been high, but they were never higher than at this moment, when she swiftly, and more skilfully than any of her pupils would have expected, slid over the edge of the well and hung by her hands. Joan knelt, and, gripping her hands, lowered her still farther, and she dropped lightly the last couple of feet, and was on her knees by Dick in an instant.

‘He isn’t dead. But he’s fainted; this is more than sleep. I’m afraid something is broken—that leg certainly is, and there may be internal damage too. It will be difficult to get him home up all those steps. You’ll need to bring help, Joan—two men, if you can, and ropes, and something to carry him on; a door would do.’

‘You don’t mind me going? But I must; Micky would never be able to make them understand.’

‘No, no! Go quickly, child! Don’t tell the girls—oh, you will have to, if you go by the passage! Don’t excite them more than you can help, then, and try to reassure Della. He isn’t dead, and I don’t see why he should die.’

‘I’ll be as quick as I can.’ Joan took the torch from Micky, and set off at full speed by ‘Underground’ for the Hall.

CHAPTER XXX

THE JEWELS OF LADY JEHANE

Agnes's remark, that the Hall provided a new sensation for every morning, was extended that day into—'And sometimes two!' when Joan, finding the panel door left open by Joy's party, appeared suddenly in their midst from the secret passage, with only the momentary noise of her run along the tunnel to give them warning.

The girls all looked up in startled surprise, but she gave them no time to ask questions. 'Excuse me, Miss Anskell. I'm awfully sorry. But we've found him, and he's had an accident, and we're afraid he's rather badly hurt. In the passage—yes. I have to fetch help. Miss Macey's with him now. We'll bring him home as quickly as we can,' and she hurried from the room.

First to send maids flying in search of the gardeners, with orders to come to the abbey gate bringing ropes and some kind of door or hurdle, as there had been an accident—she knew the men would understand; then to fetch the key of the abbey and ease that difficulty; then to see that water was boiling, brandy ready, and a downstairs bed prepared, and to send a messenger flying to the village for the doctor.

For this last duty she fetched Della and Jack out of their French class. 'You two can do it quite well; the maids may be needed here. He isn't going to die, Della; he's only broken his leg, so you needn't cry. Just do something to help him. The very best thing is to sprint all you know for the doctor. Just fly, both of you; perhaps he'll bring you back in his car. You know his house, Della?—opposite the church?'

'Yes,' Della gasped. 'Where is Dicky, Joan?'

'In one of the tunnels you discovered. I can't tell you why; that's his business. He's got to tell us that! But we found him there; Miss Macey's looking after him. Now fly!'—and they flew, hatless and in tunics, just as they were.

Then Joan, with a swift apology to Mademoiselle, called Jen to do her share. Jen had been looking very rebellious when she found herself the only one of the 'family' left to wrestle with idioms and irregular verbs. Her face lit up with joy as she sprang to follow Joan.

Joan laughed. 'You don't trust me. You thought I'd forgotten you! I've something tons better than going for the doctor for you, Jenny-Wren!'

'Oh! *What?* How absolutely topping!'

'We'll have to wait here for the men.' Joan paused at the abbey gate. 'I hope they won't be long. Where do you think Dick is, Jen?'

'In the tunnels, you said?'

'He's in Ambrose's old church, and he's fallen into St Ethelwyn's well!' Joan said dramatically.

'*Joan!* True and honest? But I thought the church was pulled down?'

'So did I, but it isn't. It's there underground, and it's simply priceless. There's no possible mistake. I've been thinking about it, while I've been flying round doing things for Dick,' Joan said thoughtfully. 'The monks must have built the abbey church over this old one, instead of pulling it down, and have kept the old one as a crypt for theirs. It's very, very old, Jen—all rough Saxon work, far older than any bit of the abbey. It will be the most precious bit of the whole abbey, so far as age goes; I'm simply longing to look at it properly! Of course, we knew

the monks hadn't pulled it down, since it was evidently there in Ambrose's time. But apparently Henry didn't either; I suppose his men never discovered the crypt, or else didn't worry about it, just as they didn't worry to pull down the refectory or chapter-house. They were only hunting for plunder, and there's no *sign* of any treasures in the old church!' Her tone was full of meaning.

Jen gave a little gasp. 'No sign of any? Oh, Joan! Do you think the jewels are still there?'

'That's what you and I are going to find out, just as soon as ever we've got Dick safely home and all the crowd out of the way.'

'Oh, I *am* glad you let me into this!' Jen whispered, as the men came hurrying up.

'It wouldn't have been decent not to let you in,' Joan said swiftly. 'We owe the church to you, and the jewels too, if we find them.'

With many exclamations of amazement, the gardeners and two maids followed Joan and Jen down the stair from the lilac-bush and into the crypt. Jen, amazed and thrilled beyond all words, stood gazing for a moment, then ran with the rest to look into the well.

'Where's Miss Macey?' she cried. 'Oh, Joan! *She's in the well!*'

It was indeed a surprising place to find one's head mistress. Miss Macey, well aware that the story would be all over the school immediately, was steadily chafing Dick's hands and speaking encouragingly to him to pass the time of waiting. He had come to himself with a start and shudder, and from his broken exclamations of relief at sight of her she had gathered something of the length of time he had lain there and of his terror when he knew Micky was not coming back. She had drawn him on to talk, knowing it would help him after those terrible hours of silence, and in spite of his pain he had managed to tell her how he came to be there, how they had found the church, and how they had been cut off from home unconsciously by Joan.

'I was looking for the jewels—in the story, you know,' he whispered brokenly, and Miss Macey repeated this to Joan when at last she had been helped out of the well by the men, with the aid of the ropes. But that was not till she had seen Dick safely drawn up. The movement cost him such pain that he screamed aloud and then fainted again; he was laid on a hurdle and carried swiftly and gently away, and Miss Macey followed to direct operations at the house.

'She would go down the well,' Joan laughed. 'Said she must go to him. It was quite her own idea; she wanted to know how much he was hurt. I helped her; she did it awfully neatly, too!'

'I always said she was a sport!' Jen said warmly. 'But I *never* expected to find Miss Macey sitting at the bottom of St Ethelwyn's well!'

'True for you, Jenny-Wren! Neither did I!' Joan laughed. Then she ran after the little party, and said a hasty word to the young gardener in the rear. 'Come back here when you've taken him to the house. I want you to help me. Bring a spade and trowel, and anything else that would be useful. I may want to dig up some of the stones in the floor. Don't say anything to anybody about it yet, please!'

'I like that Bob,' she said, returning to Jen. 'He's a decent fellow; he'll do what we want—if we want anything done! Now, Jen, use your eyes *hard!* Ambrose buried the jewels in the old church, and marked the place with her name! Let's have a good look round, anyway!'

She held her torch aloft, and they began a thorough exploration of the crypt. The four beautiful pillars, with their carved fruit and foliage, and the raised platform between them, which they had seen already as they entered, but had passed quickly in their haste to reach Dick, were the first to draw their attention. Joan said swiftly, 'These are much later than that

other part where the well is. These aren't Saxon! They're Early English, like the chapter-house. Perhaps this'—pointing to the platform—'is a tomb, and they built the pillars round it and brought this end of the church up to date.'

'There are letters on it.' Jen had scrambled up to look. 'But I can hardly read them. It's not Jehane, though. There's an M at one end, and I think an L or an I at the other, but they're nearly rubbed out. Bring the light nearer, Joan!'

'Michael?' Joan sprang to her side. 'I say! I believe it is! Oh, *what* a find!' her eyes blazed with delight.

'Who was he? D'you know him, then?'

'The first abbot. He founded the abbey.' Joan was tremulous with eagerness. 'Perhaps the church—they'd call it the "new church," of course—was still being built when he died, so they buried him down here in this old one. That would account for the date of the pillars. They hadn't any business to put carving like that in those days; it was very much against all their strict rules! But perhaps they loved him and wanted him to have a beautiful tomb.'

'There's much beautifuller ones than this in York Minster, for I've seen them,' said Jen. 'I think it's very plain!'

'They weren't supposed to use decoration or ornament.' Joan spoke absently, gazing down at Michael's half-defaced name. 'There was a lot more wording there, but it's all worn away. There's an old image of him in the gatehouse wall, over the door, you know, but it's dreadfully knocked about. I'm afraid if we find Jehane's name we may not recognise it,' she added. 'But, of course, it would be only half as old as this. It's quite eight hundred years since Michael died.'

'Eight hundred years!' Jen looked down at the tomb with awe. Then she pleaded, 'Let's look for Jehane, anyway, Joan! Bob may come back in a minute, and we haven't found the place yet! You can have dreams about Michael later on, you know!'

Joan laughed. 'Yes, we can think about it all later. But it's so extraordinary!—the abbot Michael's grave!—after all these centuries! Whatever will people say? Whether we find the jewels or not, Jen, the abbey is going to be far more wonderful and precious, both to me and other people, and far more interesting, because of these discoveries we've made to-day. I'm not the only person who's keen on it, you know! And I shall always count all this partly due to you!'

Jen swallowed something in her throat, wondering indignantly why she should want to cry when she was so tremendously excited and eager to find the jewels. But she loved Joan, and Joan loved the abbey; if she had added anything at all to Joan's joy in it, Jen would be thankful all her life.

'You ought to thank Dick, it seems to me!' she said honestly, however. 'We'd never have found it, but for him!'

'But he would never have come but for you! Oh, yes! Miss Macey did say he told her he'd been here before he heard about the jewels,' for Miss Macey had hurriedly given her the gist of Dick's confessions. 'All the same, I'd prefer to thank you, Jenny-Wren! Dick *may* have been looking for the jewels for my sake, but honestly, I doubt it!'

'I'm jolly well sure he wasn't!' said Jen. Then her triumphant shout rang through the old church. '*Jehane!* There, Joan! On the wall!—Oh, doesn't it make you feel queer? Doesn't it make it all real? There's her name, just as he said; just as if it had been yesterday!'

They stood together gazing at 'Jehane III' with startled, incredulous eyes. The old-time story was suddenly proved true, and Ambrose and his lady lived once more before them.

Jen choked again. ‘Oh, what an idiot I am! But can’t you see him cutting those letters all alone some night, when they knew Henry’s men might come at any moment? He wouldn’t dare to do it a moment sooner than he need, of course, for fear of questions! They look as if they’d been done in a hurry—all squiggly! And then he was driven out, and never came back; and she came back to the Hall, but the abbey was all in ruins, and she didn’t know where he’d hidden the jewels, or if he’d taken them with him. I expect she waited all her life expecting him to bring them back to her. And they were here all the time, buried, and there was nobody to tell her!’

Joan became practical again, with a ringing laugh. ‘We don’t know yet that they *are* here, Jenny-Wren! We haven’t found them yet, my dear kid! Perhaps Ambrose came back and married her, as I said, and they dug up the jewels, and she wore them at Court.’

Jen laughed, a little ashamed of her premature lapse into the sentimental. ‘How can we find out? We’ll have to dig up the floor, or break down the wall. Oh, Joan, you will let us search, won’t you? It won’t hurt the church! We can put it all back again!’

‘So long as it doesn’t damage it, I’ll search too. I’d love to find jewels!’ Joan laughed. ‘I expect those chalk marks on the wall are Master Dick’s. He evidently tried there and found nothing. I think we’ll try the floor.’

Very few words of explanation were needed to Bob, when he returned armed with pickaxe, spade, and trowel. He had worked much in the abbey grounds, mowing and rolling the cloister garth and tending the flowers in the abbot’s garden, and he knew all about the ‘old ones’ who had built it, as he called Joan’s white-robed monks. Her explanation, that she believed one of them had buried something in the underground church, and that the name and figure ‘III’ were the clue to its position, thrilled him as the thought had thrilled Jen, and he was as eager as the girls themselves in the search. He made various suggestions as to the meaning of the ‘III,’ but willingly agreed first to try Joan’s, which was to raise the third block from the foot of the wall, if possible.

‘The blocks are whole; they haven’t been broken,’ she argued. ‘He didn’t just dig a hole anywhere, but he may have raised one of those big square stones. Three feet can’t be right, if it’s anywhere in the floor, for three feet from that wall is right in the middle of a block.’

‘But it’s right in the middle of the *third* block!’ Jen said eagerly.

Joan laughed. ‘I think that must be only chance; he could hardly have arranged that! But he may have chosen it for that reason. Do you think you can get it up, Bob?’

‘Sure, Miss Joan. Easy.’ And with his pickaxe Bob set to work, while Joan stood watching and Jen squatted on the floor.

Bob’s strength was equal to his task. He raised the block of stone, and gave a shout, and the girls pressed close to see, breathless with excitement.

‘There’s a space underneath!’ Joan whispered. ‘It’s not solid earth!’ and flashed the light of her torch in and around.

Then a cry broke from all three, and all sprang forward. But Jen was first. Jumping into the hole, she held up a small box, of old black oak carved with Tudor roses, wrapped in a blue velvet cloth, which was falling to pieces. ‘Lady Jehane’s jewel-case, I bet!’ she gasped triumphantly, and held it out to Joan.

‘Hold the light, please, Bob!’ Joan begged, and sat on the floor with Bob bending eagerly over her, and Jen leaning on her knee.

The rusty lock gave way at her sharp wrench, and they gazed into the blue-lined box, where, neatly arranged in little compartments, lay stones which sparkled, stones of deep rich

colour, stones which gave back the torch-light—stones of wonderful red glowing fire, of vivid green, of shadowy blue, of dazzling light.

‘It’s a fortune, sure!’ whispered Bob, in awed amazement. ‘Be those pearls, Miss Joan?’

‘Then he didn’t come back and marry her, after all; for he’d have got them for her somehow, if he’d ever come here again,’ was Jen’s comment, when her first wild delight was over.

‘No, I’m afraid he wandered about till he died, or perhaps was killed somehow, and she had to do without her jewels. And they’ve been waiting here for us!’

‘Whose will they be?’ Jen asked eagerly. ‘They were found in your abbey, but I suppose she belonged to Joy’s family, not yours?’

‘Oh, she was Joy’s ancestress!’ Joan laughed. ‘I should think they would belong to Joy. But we won’t quarrel over them. We can divide them; there are plenty! Or if we have to give them up as treasure-trove, we’ll divide the compensation! Bob, don’t talk about these in the village, will you? We don’t want to *ask* for burglars, and it might be too much for somebody to hear they were all lying at the Hall. I’ll see that you get your share of the reward, and I’m much obliged for your help.’

‘There’s some one coming!’ said Jen, at sound of voices. ‘Hadn’t you better hide them?’

‘No, it’s only Joy and the girls. Miss Macey and Dick must have met them and told them where he was found, and Joy would be crazy to see the place, of course.’

‘She said, to squeeze round between the steps and the wall!’ Joy’s voice rang out in the silence, and Joan and Jen laughed across the jewel-case at one another. ‘Are you through, Mirry? All right, Marguerite? Then straight ahead! Fancy that wretch of a boy finding all this, and keeping it to himself! I say, isn’t this all *weird*?’

‘Your whole house and abbey are weird, “Traveller’s Joy”!’ Cicely’s voice retorted. ‘I never saw such a collection of cellars and tunnels in my life! And neither you nor Joan dreamt of it! That’s the weirdest thing of all! Not even Joan!’

‘Hallo!’ cried Joy, as her light showed the wide opening of the crypt, the beautiful pillars of Michael’s tomb, and, in another moment, the little group at the far end, beyond St Ethelwyn’s well. ‘Tableau!’ she exclaimed. ‘What are you three doing? What have you got there?’

‘The jewels of Lady Jehane!’ said Joan dramatically, while Jen gazed up at the four Queens in triumphant delight.

CHAPTER XXXI

PRECIOUS STONES FOR DINNER

‘It’s very difficult to get any work done in your house, Joy!’ Miss Macey laughed, in mock distress, as, in the secrecy of her study, she was shown the jewels and told the whole story. ‘I am inclined to agree with the girls; you find us a new sensation every day—and sometimes two!’

‘Or rather, Dick does,’ Joan put in. ‘If he and Della hadn’t come to the abbey, I suppose none of all this would ever have happened. He’s a little wretch, of course, but—oh, Miss Macey, just suppose they hadn’t come! Think how much poorer we should be! Quite apart from the treasures we’ve found, think how much more we know of the abbey now! There’s so much more of it!—all the passages and entrances, and the connection with the Hall, and the old crypt and well, and Michael’s tomb!’

‘*And* the cups and plates and things, *and* the jewels!’ Joy added, keenly excited.

‘And the books!’ Jen put in eagerly. ‘They’re simply gorgeous! And all the story of Jehane and Ambrose! That adds ever so much to the abbey, Joan says. It seems to put real people into it.’

‘Yes, I’m as thankful for that story, and the books, as for anything—except perhaps the old church and the well and the tomb,’ Joan said thoughtfully. ‘Those really are tremendous finds, you know, Jen! People will be coming down to see the crypt and tomb, heaps of them. I must write to the man who comes every year to see that the abbey is all right; he’ll be as much excited over it as I am. Our discoveries will cause lots of interest, I know.’

‘We shall be finding ourselves in the papers next, and pictures of us and the abbey and everything!’ Joy laughed.

‘I shouldn’t wonder!’ Miss Macey agreed. ‘You must be prepared for interviewers, Joan.’

‘I think they’d better interview Jen or Dick! They won’t get pictures of *me* for the papers!’ Joan said decisively. ‘Joy can scatter hers round, if she likes—“Miss Joy Abinger-Shirley, the young owner of Abinger Hall, where the recent astonishing antiquarian discoveries were made. Her romantic history”—and so on. I could make up quite a decent paragraph myself!’

‘One paper can put it in as Joy’s picture, and another can use it as yours,’ Jen remarked. ‘The same old one would do for both of you. I think I’d like to see an interviewer! Don’t you think they’d like a picture of me, Joy?’

‘What does the doctor say about Dick, Miss Macey?’ Joan asked. ‘He’s been a nuisance—I mean Dick, of course, not the doctor!—but after all he was the one to find the hermit’s church! Jen found out about the jewels and gave us the story of Lady Jehane, but we had no idea the church still existed. If Dick hadn’t gone exploring, we might never have found it.’

‘What put him on to it?’ Joy asked, and when Miss Macey had explained, nothing would satisfy her and Joan but to go back to the steps, put out their torches, and see that faint gleam of light for themselves.

‘We’d never have noticed it,’ Joy admitted. ‘Dick’s “some” smart! But, of course, if he came here in the dark that would help.’

‘We might not have found it, but I think when that man from town came down to see the tunnels he’d maybe have seen it. He’s got jolly quick eyes,’ Joan said.

‘The doctor has set Dick’s leg, and he is sleeping,’ Miss Macey explained, in answer to Joan’s question. ‘He has no other injury, I am thankful to say, except some bruises; but, of course, he will not walk for some weeks.’

‘Thanks be! We may hope for a little peace, then,’ Joy remarked.

‘But he is very much exhausted, and will need quiet and careful nursing for some days,’ Miss Macey added gravely. ‘He needed a severe lesson, I admit, but he has had it, Joy. He really believed we should never find him, and that he would lie there till he died. Those few hours must have been a terrible ordeal for a boy; he’s not so very old yet.’

‘Goodness, no! He’s just an infant, and a silly infant at that,’ Joy said vigorously. ‘But it was rough on him, Miss Macey; I quite see that.’

‘I should think he had an awfully bad time,’ Joan said soberly. ‘I think I’d have gone crazy if I’d believed I was buried alive in a place nobody else had heard of.’

‘The doctor says there is severe shock to his system, and it certainly is no wonder. If Dick is troubled with nightmares for some time, that will be no wonder, either,’ Miss Macey said gravely.

‘No, I guess that old crypt will jolly well haunt him for quite a while. All the same, it doesn’t half serve him right for keeping it all to himself. Little pig!’ Joy said warmly.

‘Perhaps he didn’t mean to. Perhaps he just wanted the fun of being the only one to find the jewels,’ Joan suggested charitably. ‘He may have been going to bring them to us if he found them.’

‘Not he! Little pig!’ Joy said again.

‘I’m quite sure he wasn’t,’ Jen added.

Miss Macey laughed. ‘I am sorry, Joan, but you are more generous than he deserves, and I must join forces with Joy and Jen. Still, the very fact that he confessed the truth to me, and seemed ashamed of it, is a sign of grace in Dick. While we were waiting for you to come back ———’

‘In the well?’ Joy added, her eyes snapping. It was an endless regret to her that she had not seen Miss Macey at the bottom of the well.

‘Of course, my dear Joy!’ Miss Macey spoke with dignity, quite understanding Joy’s dancing eyes. ‘You surely would not have had me stand for twenty minutes looking down at him, not knowing whether he was alive or dead? Remember I am responsible for his being here at all.’

‘Oh, no, it was Joan’s doing! But all the same, I think you’re a brick, and downright sporty, Miss Macey.’

Miss Macey laughed, and turned to Joan again. ‘While we were waiting, Dick said to me that he was sorry he had been so deceitful—at least, that is what he meant——’

‘I thought it didn’t sound like Dicky!’ Joy the irrepressible murmured. ‘I guess he said he was sorry he’d been such a rotten bounder!’

Miss Macey laughed again, but did not deny it. ‘He said he wanted to do the “straight thing” now. And so he owned that he had not meant to tell you if he found the jewels, because he did not want you and Joy to have them. He seems to have had some grudge against you both.’

‘Because Joan jawed him so and made him come here, and because I guessed his tune!’ Joy observed. ‘Dear boy! I knew he didn’t exactly love us. Little pig!’

‘That’s the third time, Joy. Let that be enough,’ Miss Macey said quietly.

‘All the same, it was honest of him to own up,’ Joan agreed. ‘There was no need for him to give himself away like that. Give him credit where you can, Joy. I expect he’ll try to be different when he’s better.’

‘He can do with a little improvement! Just a little!’ Joy said grimly.

‘I expect he had a jolly old fright,’ Jen remarked wisely. ‘I guess he felt like people in books, when they grow years older in a single hour. D’you think he saw his whole life pass before him, and all that?’

‘What a gloomy procession it must have been! No wonder he decided to reform!’ Joy chuckled, as Joan and Miss Macey laughed.

‘But *I* think Micky is the rottenest bounder of the lot,’ Jen added.

‘Jen, *dear!* *Please!*’ Miss Macey remonstrated, and Jen reddened and laughed apologetically. ‘I’m going down to Mrs Clarke’s to-morrow to have a talk with Micky that he won’t forget in a hurry,’ Miss Macey went on grimly. ‘Dick’s life might very well have been lost by Micky’s wicked foolishness. If Dick had been more seriously injured, he might have died before we found him. And I consider his reason was really endangered. It was a mercy that he slept; if he had lain there from two o’clock till nearly eleven without sleeping part of the time, the results might have been most serious. I know Micky is small and was badly frightened, but he ought to have known enough to come for help at once. Now there is the gong, so dinner is ready. Are you going to tell the girls of this latest find?’

‘Oh, rather!’ from Joy.

‘Oh, please let us!’ from Jen.

‘I think we’d better,’ Joan laughed. ‘A secret like that would be very hard to keep!’

‘Like money burning holes in our pockets,’ Jen added. ‘You tell them, Joan! But let me come too!’

‘Oh, we’ll all go!’ Joy laughed, and they formed a bodyguard to Joan as she bore the little oak case aloft in triumph into the dining-room, where day and boarding-girls were all assembled.

‘What now? Anything more?’ whispered Edna Gilks. ‘Just look at Joy’s face!’

‘And Jenny-Wren’s! Something more has happened, sure and certain! Isn’t this the *weirdest* house?’

Joan went to the head of the table. Joy lifted aside the soup tureen, and Jen put a big empty plate in its place and covered it with the torn blue velvet cloth. From the velvet-lined case, Joan took handful after handful of precious stones, while the whole crowd of girls watched in stunned amazement, awed into silence.

‘Girls!’ There was a quiver of excitement in the Queen’s voice, and Jen shivered in sympathy. ‘Rubies—emeralds—sapphires—glorious pearls—turquoises—amethysts—topazes—and others whose names I don’t know—the lost jewels of Lady Jehane! Jen and I found them, just where Brother Ambrose buried them in 1536, in the hermit’s old church, near St Ethelwyn’s well.’

‘A personally-conducted tour to the crypt of St Ethelwyn and the tomb of the Abbot Michael will start punctually at 2.30!’ announced Joy. ‘Other parties will be arranged later! You’ll all have to see the place these came from, so the sooner we get it over the better! How do you like precious stones for dinner?’

‘Has the abbey any *more* secrets, Joan?’ cried Peggy Gilks, when she had recovered her breath.

Joan looked up with a laugh from the jewels she was turning over with her fingers. 'I shouldn't think so. But I'm sure I don't know! But I think we've done fairly well for you in that line!'

'All the same, you never know your luck!' Jen remarked. 'We didn't when we came here, did we, Joan?'

'True for you, Jenny-Wren! We did *not!*' the Queen agreed.

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[The end of *The Girls of the Abbey School* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]