

THE ABBEY GIRLS AGAIN



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Title: The Abbey Girls Again [unabridged]

Date of first publication: 1924

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

Date first posted: Mar. 20, 2021

Date last updated: Mar. 20, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210348

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



Ros was struggling gamely.

THE ABBEY GIRLS AGAIN

by
ELSIE J. OXENHAM

First published 1924 by Collins.

TO MADAM WHO TEACHES US AND DANCES
TO US AND THE PIXIE WHO GIVES
US HELP AND WISE ADVICE
THIS STORY IS DEDICATED
WITH THANKS FOR
CONTINUED
FRIENDSHIP

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CHAPTER I

OFF TO THE PICTURES

"You'll come, won't you, old thing?"

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

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

"Oh, but she can't stop you! You must have some fun, like everybody else. We simply couldn't go without you. Be a sport, Biddy, and dodge her somehow!"

"It must be rotten to have an old creature like that always fussing when you want to do any little thing," said another of the girls, who were standing in a bunch at the door of a big commercial training college in the heart of London. "I'm sure, after such a beastly all-day grind as we've had, we're due a little fun at night! I consider shorthand positively wicked!"

"It is the limit," Biddy agreed, swinging her case and looking irresolute. "But Mary might say three times of the pictures in one week was the limit, too. And I'm going out to-morrow night as well. It leaves her all alone, you see. It's not as if we were a proper family."

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

"My hat! She'd never go to the pictures!" laughed Doris. "She's as old as St. Paul's!"

"Can't be, if she's Biddy's sister. Biddy's only fifteen. Is she a step, Biddums?"

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

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

Biddy knew it very well. She was pretty and good company, and a general favourite with this set into which she had drifted at the college, girls and boys alike. She knew her sister did not like her friends; but she argued that as they were all preparing for the same life, planning to be clerks or typists, she might as well find her companions among them at once. Mary pointed out that she had been to a better school than the majority of the girls she met in classes, and should have higher ideals; but Biddy brushed that argument aside with a brief: "But I'm with this lot now, and I'm likely to stay with them, so what's the use of trying to be different?"

But, reason as she might, an uncomfortable feeling remained, and as she climbed the long, bare stairs to their top flat Biddy was wondering if Mary would be very much upset to hear she wanted to go out again. She knew she would go. Mary never did manage to stop her, and though she might be indignant at the moment, she always calmed down again, Biddy thought hopefully. Go to-night she must, if the boys were to be there. She could not bear to spoil the party and disappoint everybody. But she hoped Mary would not take it too badly.

"It does leave her alone an awful lot!" she mused, as she went more and more slowly up the stairs. "I wonder she doesn't *make* me stop in sometimes! I'd hate it if she did, but it's queer that she doesn't try it on. I'm only fifteen, and, after all, she's thirty! It *is* old! Old enough to get her own way, anyway. But I sometimes think poor old Mary's a bit soft. Well, I

don't mean that exactly. But if she'd got any spunk she'd sit on me a lot harder than she does. If I'd tried this kind of thing on at school—help! What scenes there would have been! Or even with Mother; she'd never have put up with it. Mary just says she wishes I wouldn't! I suppose,” with a reluctant spasm of conscience, “that ought to be enough for me! If I were a really nice girl, I'd do what she wants all the more willingly because she never tries to bully. As it is, I do what I like, and—and take advantage of her because she doesn't, or can't, make me do as she wants. I believe it's really that she can't. But she *ought* to be able to! I'm afraid I'm rather a rotten sort: not a really nice girl at all! But I must have some fun; I'm only fifteen! Mary's so awfully stodgy to live with!”

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

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

They were due to get in at about the same time, she from her classes, Mary from the typewriting office in which she worked. Their father, a writer for the Press, had left them almost unprovided for; but a friend who had known him and appreciated his work had inquired into the circumstances of his widow and daughters, and, finding them in difficulties, had offered the use of a top flat in his business premises. This had made a little home, and Mary had found work near at hand.

Biddy had been still at a boarding-school, and had been kept there till she was thirteen, though only with great difficulty and sacrifice on the part of her mother and sister. But on the mother's death Biddy had come home, to go to classes close at hand; and the sisters had lived alone together for two years, Mary's earnings supplying just enough to make a home possible, with very little to spare for extras. Occasionally outside work came in her way, in the shape of private typing which could be done at home; but both she and Biddy were looking forward to the day when Biddy would be earning, too, though from different motives. Mary hoped for some relief from the grind and strain of the last few years; Biddy had visions of a good time, when she had money of her own to spend.

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

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

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

Biddy glanced at her as she curled up on the rug, “Anything jolly happened? You look brightened up, somehow. Oh, is it those violets? Who gave them to you? You'd never buy them for yourself! *Mary!* They're awfully expensive ones! Who's been giving you flowers, Mary?” in a tone of stern surprise.

Mary laughed again as she bent to fill the brown teapot from the kettle on the ring. “Wouldn't you like to know? Well, I won't tease. It was a girl who came into the office this afternoon.”

“Oh! A girl!” Biddy's tone was full of disappointed meaning.

“You didn't think it was a man, I suppose? To me?” Mary retorted. “But you would think of boys, of course. I'd rather have them from a girl, thank you. Sit in to the table, and I'll tell you about her.”

"No, I'm going to sit here by the fire. We'll put things on the floor. Come on, Mary! Be a sport and sit on a footstool! I'll hand you everything you want. It's heaps jollier."

"If I thought you would, I might enjoy sitting there, too, but I know perfectly well you won't," Mary retorted. "You'll forget all about me; and I don't like having to get up and fetch things every half minute. I'll sit where I can reach everything, thank you, and you can do your own running about. Here's your tea, to begin with."

"We could pile everything on the floor," Biddy argued again. "Oh, well, I'll have mine down here alone! Tell me about the violet girl! Why did she give them to you? Did you ask for them?"

"Such a pretty girl; such a happy girl!" Mary said wistfully. "She looked so strong and well and open-airish, and as if she'd always been perfectly happy and always would be. She came in a little car, and brought some manuscript; it's a series of articles, written by her father, and I'm to type them. She asked to see the typist who would do the work, so Mrs. Taylor called me up, and Miss Robins—she's the pretty girl—said I might take the work and look through it to-night, and her father would let me have some special instructions by to-morrow morning. She asked for my address, in case he wanted to post to me, and left the papers for me to get used to the writing, she said. She seemed to think it was very bad, but of course I'm used to that; I've had much worse. I fancy she had taken down some of the work from her father's dictation; he seems to be an invalid. By the way she apologised for the writing, I thought some of it must be hers; it's by several different people."

"But what about the violets?" Biddy demanded. "Every one who floats in doesn't give you flowers! At least, I've never heard of it before."

"It's not always done," Mary agreed gravely. "Miss Robins was carrying these, and wearing some more. They smelt so sweetly that I had to look at them, and she said, 'Aren't they perfect? Would you like them? You look tired! I'd have a perpetual headache if I lived in business. Do take them! They were for my father, but I'll get some more for him. Yes, please do! If you're going to do his work, it's only fair you should have his violets, too. He'll never forgive me when he hears you liked them, if I don't leave them with you. He'll probably send me back with them, so you may as well take them at once and save me a journey,' and she laughed and shoved the whole lot into my hands, and ran off. Wasn't it kind?"

"What a funny reason!" Biddy laughed. "You had to have his violets because you were to type his stuff! She was making that up, because you looked miserable, and she wanted an excuse to give them to you, old thing."

"I don't care. It was kind of her to put it that way. I tried to say I mustn't take them, but she wouldn't listen."

"What was she like? Dark or fair?"

"Oh, fair! Her hair was yellow, and bobbed, and all in curls, and she had the happiest blue eyes, and the sweetest mouth, as if she had laughed all her life."

"What was she dressed in?" demanded Biddy.

"A furry cap and a big fur coat. Her frock was blue, but I couldn't see much of it. There was something about the way she walked that fascinated me; I couldn't take my eyes off her, and every one else who came in looked so heavy and lumpy. She was tall, but she moved beautifully. It was the finishing touch to her."

"It's all very well to look happy when you wear fur coats, and go about in cars of your own, and buy violets like those for any old person you happen to see. I guess she's always had the best of everything," Biddy grumbled enviously.

"She cheered up our dull old office just by appearing in it to-day. Don't whine over things you can't have, my dear kid. Have you much to do to-night?"

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

"No, but you needn't have promised!" Mary jerked, and bit her lip. This obsession of Biddy's for "the pictures" was one of her troubles. "You know I think you go too often. It's the third time this week. Biddy, you must *not*! You must stop this. You think of nothing but the cinema."

"I must do something!" Biddy urged resentfully. "I can't stick here all evening! I'm not so fearfully keen on the pictures themselves; sometimes they're silly, and I get sick of them. But it's something to do, Mary. You must see it would be awfully stodgy to stay in every night! What do you want me to do? Play Patience?"

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

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

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

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

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

It was the moment for Biddy to run to her, put her arms round her, and sob out a promise never to go out at night again. But Biddy could not do it; the gulf between them was far too deep. And it would have made Mary cry far worse, Biddy argued. They both hated crying. Something must be the matter with Mary to-night!

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

Mary heard her go. With tightened lips, she carried away the tea things and washed them up, and tidied the little sitting-room. Then, sitting on a footstool by the gas fire, she took up the manuscript Jen Robins had brought and glanced through it. There were strange place-names in it, and she looked at these carefully; the writing was not easy to read. She knit her brows at sight of some stories in what she afterwards found was broad Yorkshire dialect, and studied these paragraphs closely. That was all she could do till the "further instructions" arrived. She put the papers away carefully, and took up a basket of mending.

Then she flung the stockings on to the table, and dropped again on her stool before the fire. All this, even the study of the manuscript, was shirking, holding at bay the thoughts which cried aloud for attention. Mary was an adept at this kind of putting-off, though she had hardly realised it; she could always thrust difficult problems into the background and keep them there. But to-night, for a little while, they mastered her. She clasped her hands tensely round her knees and stared unhappily into the fire.

The biggest of all her problems was Biddy.

"Why did that happen to-night?" she asked herself brokenly. "Why am I such a failure? I can't blame the child. If she finds home and me stodgy and dull, she will go out, of course. I'm all wrong, somehow; she's missing something. And yet I've tried. I've given her all I could, and I've given in to her—too much, I know. It must be fearfully quiet after that big school, but all the same she ought not to be out every night like this. She's got into a set I don't like, and she'd rather be with them than with me. That's what it comes to. It's natural, I suppose; I'm twice her age. But I'm sure Mother could have made her feel home was worth while."

She stared anxiously at the steady red glow, but it was placidly unconscious and unhelpful. A real fire, with flames, might have brought inspiration, but there was no help to be found in matter-of-fact, unromantic gas.

"I can't control her either. I can't make her want to stay at home, and I can't force her to stay against her will. She's far more determined than I am. There's something wrong in that; is it with me? I'm thirty! I ought to be able to manage a girl of fifteen. But I can't. I can sometimes persuade her; but if I tried to insist, she'd insist on her way, too, and—and I should give in for the sake of peace! It sounds awful, but it's true. Why can't I manage Biddy? Why won't she stay at home?"

For a time she stared helplessly into the untroubled glowing asbestos. But there was no help there, no solution or hope for the future. The problem baffled Mary, as it had done before. This was not the first time she had been driven to face the question. The answer escaped her still, perhaps all the more because in her heart and conscience she knew it all the time, and would not admit it. She was not only practised in shirking difficult questions, but in cheating herself into accepting answers which did not really satisfy her.

"It's perhaps because Biddy was away at school so long. We've grown apart, and now I don't know how to enter into her feelings as she needs me to do. I have tried! But there's a lot pulling against me; the 'pictures,' and Doris, and the novelettes she loves so much, and—and boys, I expect! If they make a lot of her, and ask her out, how can I expect to keep her back? I'm sure she calls me a stodgy old thing! But how could I be different now? I've been at work for ten years. I suppose that pretty girl to-day would think me about fifty! How could I satisfy Biddy? I'll go on trying, but I don't see that I'm to blame if I fail. I'm not a companion for her, and she's more likely to boss me than the other way round. I suppose I'm soft with her, but I'm made that way."

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

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

It had happened so simply. She had a vivid imagination, inherited from her father. She had tried to write down her dreams, but he had told her plainly she was on the wrong lines and was producing nothing which could be published. To change all her way of thought, and become practical in her imagining, had been too difficult and troublesome. She had kept the dreams, but had kept them for herself alone. Whenever the outer world was dull, or when problems were too hard, Mary lapsed into her dream-world and was happy. She was much alone, with little to think about; the habit was a great comfort to her, and kept her placidly contented when she ought to have craved very much more. It was far easier to dream than to study and think, so she did not trouble to read much, though the library was not far away.

And, quite blind to what she was doing, she wondered that she could not cope with Biddy, or be a companion to her.

To-night, as she sat dreaming, she wandered with her Knight through the Enchanted Forest. How well she knew each of its winding tracks, its long green alleys, its sunlit glades and sudden depths, its church-like aisles, where the trees were bare pines or smooth beeches, its sunny, open woodlands, where were chestnuts and oaks, its bramble thickets, its hillsides of gorse and heather and silver birch, its streams and ponds fringed with willow and alder, its thick, dark, hidden recesses! She had spent many happy hours exploring it all, had known many strange adventures here, and seen heroic rescues and desperate deeds, had watched hunted maidens, disguised as pages, fleeing from their persecutors to the shelter of the friendly trees, welcomed by kindly hermits in their remote cells, sometimes rescued gallantly just in time, sometimes seized and carried back by the villain of the story, when the escape and the rescue had to take place all over again. No story in Mary's Enchanted Land ever ended unhappily; there was enough unhappiness in real life; but her heroes and heroines often had to undergo incredible hardships before their happiness was reached.

To-night her Knight—her particular Knight; there were several of them—had no time for adventures. He was bound on a quest, and luckily no distressed damsel appeared to turn him from it. He was riding, on his great black horse, to the castle of his King; serious matters were ahead of him there, and he was in sober mood as he rode down through the forest to the edge of the shining lake and hailed a boat to ferry him across to the island on which the castle stood. What he did with the black horse Mary could not have told; she was anything but practical in her fantasies.

With her hero, she reached the island, climbed the long steps to the castle, and entered the King's hall. Her Knight was not welcome; the King frowned heavily when he appeared. All was not well between them; how exactly Mary knew every detail of the difficulty!—how it had arisen, the many ways out, the only possible way for her Knight to choose! There was only one way he could take; he was real enough to her for that.

She watched as he saluted the King, heard the questions asked and the inevitable, but disastrous, answers given, saw him bidden to choose, to obey or take the consequences——

CHAPTER II

THE MARY AND DOROTHY

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

Who could it possibly be? Biddy had her key. Could there have been an accident? Bad news? No one ever called; and it was not post time. Mary was looking startled and a little frightened as she opened the door, her eyes still bewildered with the sudden plunge back to earth.

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

"May I come in, just for a second?" a happy girl's voice, full of music, asked the question. "Did I startle you? Were you asleep?" and the blue eyes searched Mary's face curiously. "Do you mind if Frost comes in too? It's quite ridiculous, I know, but Mother made me promise absolutely that I wouldn't come in unless he was with me; and I want to come in! I think she thought I might be going into a den of robbers, or coiners, or kidnappers, or a night club, or a dope place; anything you like! I told her you didn't look the least like the representative of kidnappers or coiners; but she made me promise. So may he come in, too? He drives our car, you know. We haven't been in London long, and Mother's still a bit nervy about me, poor dear. It's all rot, of course; but we're country people—Yorkshire, from the moors, as you may have discovered from Daddy's papers!—and Mother and he are sure somebody wants to run away with me. I say I'm perfectly safe, because there's so much of me. It would be so fearfully difficult to dispose of the body, if I were the victim of a deadly crime, wouldn't it? *Are you a den of robbers, Miss Devine?*"

She was tall, but managed her height in a wonderful way, moving with that easy, unconscious grace which Mary had noticed in the office. She wore the same round fur cap on short yellow curls, and the big motoring coat, which she had thrown open as she climbed the long stairs. The blue of her frock matched her eyes; she was keenly, intensely alive, and her face and voice had a radiant note of happiness very fascinating and quite irresistible. Her eyes were roaming eagerly about, full of interest in the new surroundings; she knew several London flats, but this one fell short of the others she had visited. It was quietly home-like but rather bare, and the touch of beauty and colour, in which her artist friends delighted, was missing.

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

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

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

Jen’s eyes were satisfied as she watched the change in her face. “She’s not so very old,” she said to herself. “I suppose being in an office makes one old; I’ve always said I should die! —Do you live all alone?” she demanded severely. “I suppose it’s frightfully rude to ask, but I simply must know. You couldn’t be as lonely as that, surely! Do you mind my asking?”

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

“And you darn her stockings?”

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

“I never thought of it. It’s a jolly idea! I’ve always had as many flowers as I’ve wanted, so I’ve had no need to double them.” Jen watched her as she arranged bluebells and daffodils in a vase to stand against the mirror.

“I want as many as I can get. You’ve brought me such a lovely lot. It’s more than kind of you to think of me,” Mary said warmly. “I shall take some to the office to-morrow and put them on my desk, and I’ll see woods and fields all the time I’m working. I think Mr. Robins’s manuscript will be interesting to type; I’m looking forward to it.”

“I brought you this,” and Jen handed her an envelope. “I know what my writing’s like, and it’s worse still when he’s dictating to me; and I’m not much prouder of his than of my own. So I’ve printed all the place-names that would be strange to you, and some of the dialect; you’ll soon get used to it. Then there are some notes from him as to how he wants it arranged.”

Mary glanced through the instructions. “That will be a great help. I wish everybody would take as much trouble. I shall have no difficulty at all now. You are very thoughtful.”

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

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

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

“I’ve a typewriter here,” Mary said eagerly. “It was my father’s. It’s an old one, but does quite good work. I would be glad to do it for you.”

“I was sure you would, the moment I saw you this afternoon, but I hadn’t got the thing with me. I want about two dozen programmes for a show I’m giving with a few friends. I’m rather thrilled about it! Shall I tell you?”

Her laughing, eager eyes were irresistible. Mary sat down on her stool by the fire again to listen. It was long since any outside interest had gripped her as did this girl’s vivid personality. “Please do! I’d love to hear. What kind of show?”

"Oh, folk-dancing! There isn't anything else I care about; nothing else worth while! It's this way! We've taken a flat close by, right in town here, for six months, so that Daddy can have treatment from a specialist. I used to teach my boys and girls in our village, but that has had to stop for the time. Of course, we went to church here and made friends; I had friends in town, school friends, but Mother hadn't, and she likes to make them through our church. The people there have a girls' club, and the leader, who taught them gym and drill and singing, has had to go away for some months with an aunt who is ill and has to live in the country. So the club is stranded; and the committee people have found out that I'm a little bit mad on the subject of folk-dancing; that's how it looks to Mother! *I* say I'm just awfully keen on it, both for myself and to pass it on to others. Anyway, they asked me to carry on till the other person comes back, and gave me leave to teach all the dancing I like, so long as it's folk. They don't want ordinary dancing; lots of church clubs don't. Some won't even let their girls have country-dancing; but this is an enlightened kind of church, and they say their girls may dance, so long as it's folk-dances. As the other kind bores me stiff, that's all right, and I can help them."

"But what is the difference?" Mary managed to get in a word with difficulty. "What is folk-dancing? I'm afraid I'm very ignorant!"

"Oh, not more than lots of people!" Jen laughed. "You really only know the difference when you've seen country-dancing. Folk-dancing is country, morris, or sword; old dances that have come down to us for hundreds of years, with the most beautiful old music that haunts one for days. It's 'folk' because it grew among the common people and was kept alive by them; it was never made, any more than a folk-song is made. It's for everybody, not just for a few trained and beautiful dancers; any one can do a country-dance. These girls—shop-girls and clerks, I believe—will love it as much as we used to do at school. My village kiddies loved it; and so do the most musical and artistic people you can find; for I know some of them! But the girls won't know what it's like, so I've asked a few friends to come along the first evening and give them a little show, just by way of a start and to introduce the new subject."

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

"I hope they'll love the dances! But really I'm feeling frightfully nervous about the job. I'm only eighteen! There may be lots of them older than I am. I've only taught children or village girls. Some of those were nearly my age, but they weren't like London girls. These have had a real gym teacher; I'm terrified of them. Unless they're keen, they may not get on with me at all. That's the reason for my show; I want to make them frightfully keen as a start."

"I don't think you need be nervous," Mary said quietly. "They'll fall in love with you and do anything for you."

"I don't know!" Jen said doubtfully. "I shall try to make them love the dances. Well, I thought I ought to have a few programmes for the friends who are helping me, and for one or two outsiders who may come to look on. I believe a few of the church people are curious and want to see what folk-dancing is; and one or two know what it is and want to see what we'll do, and how we'll do it!"

"I'll do them for you gladly. Who is going to give the show? Shall you dance yourself?"—there was an unconscious hungry note in Mary's voice.

"Oh, rather! There will be eight or a dozen of us. I know lots of folk-dance people now, and I've begged a few to come. They're awfully decent, and they promised right away. It's

going to be rather a joke,” and Jen’s eyes danced with delight. “You’ll hardly see the point, but we’re going to pretend we’re the real thing, the people who go to demonstrate the dances all over the country. We know one of them, and she’s a tremendous sport, besides an absolutely heavenly dancer! She said at once she’d come herself, and give me a good start, and she’d wear her blue frock, and she’s borrowed others for us from her friends, so that we’ll be all alike. So we’re going to dress up as Staff people, real demonstrators, the other girls and I; and we’ll feel bigger than we’ve ever felt in our lives before. It’s been the dream of my life to wear a blue frock!—I mean, a real demonstration frock; I shall grow at least six feet more than I am now when I put it on. It will be the hugest joke—to all of us, anyway. And we’ll probably all lose our heads with excitement, and disgrace Madam and the frocks. I’ve told Jack if she dares to mess up things, I’ll get a divorce! Jack’s my chum; we used to be married when we were at boarding-school together, and she’s still my husband. But I mustn’t go babbling on like this. You should cough, or yawn, or tread on my toe, or pretend to go to sleep. My friends have to stop me sometimes, if they want an innings themselves. I’ll have bored you to tears!”

“I’m not weeping,” Mary assured her swiftly. “I’ve felt no desire to yawn. I’m very much interested. I hope you’ll have a very jolly evening. May I see your programme?”

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

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

“Oh, it’s a dear! It was my first dance. You ought to learn it. We put that in for me. Then ‘Gathering Peascods;’ those are all country-dances; and ‘Newcastle,’ to finish that group, because we all love it so. Then Madam’s going to dance a morris jig for us, to let us get our breath—‘The Old Woman tossed up in a Blanket;’ and if there’s an encore—and there will be! We’ll see to that! Her dancing’s a dream—it will be ‘Lumps of Plum Pudding.’ Later on she’ll do us ‘Princess Royal’ and ‘Ladies’ Pleasure.’ She’s awfully sporting, and always kind and willing to help.”

“The names are delightful,” and Mary read others here and there. “‘Laudnum Bunches’—‘Bobbing Joe’—‘Shepherd’s Hey’—‘Rigs o’ Marlow’——”

“Those are all morris dances. She taught them to us, so they ought not to be too bad. We’ll do our best!”

“‘Lady in the Dark’—‘Maid in the Moon’—‘Old Noll’s Jig’—‘Childgrove’—‘Parson’s Farewell’—‘Oranges and Lemons’—‘Scotch Cap’—‘Sweet Kate’—‘Sellenger’s Round.’ How quaint some of the names are! What do they mean?”

“Nobody knows. They were most likely songs, and had dances put to the tunes. All those country-dances were known and danced in the seventeenth century, and may have been old then. Wouldn’t you like to come and see my show?”

“Oh!” Mary looked up at her, her face flushing in excitement. “Did you see how much I wanted to be asked? I tried not to show it. I’d like it above all things! But it’s too kind! I’ve never seen anything of the sort.”

“You must come, then, and bring your sister. I’ll send you tickets. I hope it will be good, but you must remember we’re only learning ourselves. We aren’t very good. The girls won’t know that, but I hope other people won’t be too critical.”

“Biddy and I won’t know either. I’m sure it will be delightful. But won’t you be nervous?”

"Of the audience, do you mean? Gracious, no! They simply won't exist, once the music starts. We shall just enjoy ourselves," Jen laughed. "We'll pretend it's a party, but with more room than usual. A country-dance party is generally a fearful crush. Oh, I shall never think of the audience once I hear the tune! Nothing but the dance matters then. That's why it's such a splendid rest for business people; everything goes away, and you think only of the movements, and the pattern you're making, and of keeping right with the music. No, it's the teaching afterwards I'm nervous of! Now I simply must go. I've a great friend coming for a day or two, and she'll be there waiting for me by this time.—I say, Miss Devine! You will let me pay you for doing the programmes? You'll tell me honestly how much they ought to be? I haven't the foggiest notion."

"It really isn't worth while. I'll be delighted to do them. It's so very little," Mary said quickly.

"Oh, but please——!" Jen pleaded. "I'd hate to take your work for nothing. It isn't fair to take a working person's spare time; I'd feel a perfect beast, and be sorry I had asked you. I only dared to ask you because I felt so sure you would understand and be nice about it. I'd feel far happier, really."

Mary hesitated. Then she said quietly, "I don't want anything for doing them. If you'll let me and Biddy see the show, you'll be giving us a big treat. But I would far rather take a little for doing the work than have you feel uncomfortable in any way. I wouldn't like to think you were sorry you had asked me."

"That's nice of you," Jen said warmly. "I'd feel very bad if you didn't let me treat you fairly. See how long the work takes, and tell me honestly how much I ought to give you. You must know what your time's worth by the hour! I'll be far happier that way, and I think you're a sport to understand."

"Thank you so much for the flowers!" said Mary, with a little smile, as she opened the door. "And you will let us see your show? I haven't been to anything of the kind for ages. You've no idea what a treat it will be."

"I'll let you have all particulars. Biddy must come, too. Good-night! Mother will be thinking you have kidnapped me, after all."

As she closed the door, Mary glanced at the clock, then went to uncover her typewriter. "I've a clear hour before Biddy's likely to come in. I'll get the programmes done at once. And I'd better count the minutes, and work out the bill to a fraction of a farthing! It will amuse her, anyway.—These pretty old names! I'll enjoy copying them. 'Heartsease!' Fancy that being a dance!—oh, it's for four people! She's put the number of dancers against each! How interesting! 'Heartsease' is a 'square for four.' So is 'Rufty Tufty,' and 'Parson's Farewell' is another. 'The Boatman' is 'longways for six'; what does that mean? 'Scotch Cap' is the same. Then here are 'squares for eight'; will that be like a quadrille? And 'rounds' for six or eight; what are they? 'Longways for as many as will;' that's quaint, too," and she calculated distances, arranged the setting of her page, and set to work with real enjoyment.

Biddy was later than usual. Mary had put the typewriter away, and was darning and dreaming again before the door opened. But this time there was a difference in the dreams. It was not so easy to lose herself in unreal romance after the new and very real happenings of the day. Jen Robins's happy face would come, instead of scenes of her own imagining.

It was an unusual experience for Mary to have something fresh to think about; her life had been monotonous, with Biddy and work for its only interests. Work as a subject for meditation

at home had been unsatisfying; Biddy had been a difficult problem. The way of escape from both had been all too easy.

But this was different. Here was something pleasant to think over, something to look forward to which in its very novelty would be exciting. She went over the names of the dances; thought wistfully that there would be music—music in which Jen could forget all the rest of the world and lose herself entirely; remembered the promise of one very special dancer, who would “do jigs,” whatever they were—jigs with odd, quaint names that spoke of old country folk,—some one whose dancing was “a dream” and “absolutely heavenly,” and who was “a tremendous sport” and “always kind and willing to help.” She wondered if it were the dancing that had made tall Jen move so beautifully; it would be a joy to see her dance! And was it this interest, this delight in music, that gave her her look of radiant happiness? As she sat by the fire, and later as she went to bed, Mary for the first night for years had no time, no space in her mind, for unreal dreams.

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

“Goodness *me*, Mary!” Biddy’s voice rang out. “Who’ve you had here? Who’s been flirting with you now? Daffodils! Bluebells! *Mary!*” and she stared at her sister with accusing eyes.

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

CHAPTER III

THE FAIRY GODMOTHERS

"Did you have a good time? Was it Garbo again?" Mary asked, as she laid the table for supper.

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

Mary listened gladly, but made no comment. Now and then a remark of Biddy's showed that there was hope for her still. Occasionally a healthy tomboy strain asserted itself and revolted against the inanities which amused the rest of her set; at these times she spoke and felt as a schoolgirl of fifteen and not as a prematurely grown-up city child. It was this side of Biddy that Mary would gladly have strengthened, if she had known how. To-night, stirred to new and active thought by Jen's visit, she made a really useful suggestion.

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

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

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

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

"I'd have waited in to see her if I'd known!" she said hungrily, as Mary told her story. "Let me see the programmes! I'll be very careful.—Oh, I know some of these! We did a few country-dances at school. I liked 'Gathering Peascods.' And 'Rigs' is great sport; you have sticks, and bang your partner. Well, I mean you bang her stick, of course. I could do that one still. 'Glorishears'—oh, how weird!"

"Why is that one weird? I didn't know you had done any folk-dancing," Mary said thoughtfully, a new idea dawning in her mind.

"We did this one at school, and the girls thought it was rather silly. You have hankies, one in each hand, and you clap and stamp; they used to say it was an infants' dance, and too kiddie for us. It's weird to think of grown-up people doing these dances. I thought they were only for schools!"

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

"I'd like to see how she does them! I say, Mary, couldn't we ask her to squeeze us into a corner? If she's such a good sort, I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

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

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

"Of course I'm going," Mary said swiftly. "I'm every bit as keen as you are. I'd go out oftener if we could afford to go to decent things, but your endless cinemas don't appeal to me. This will be worth while."

Biddy allowed the slur on her beloved "pictures" to pass. "When is it to be, Mary? Is she coming to fetch the programmes? I'd love to see her!"

"I shall take them to the office to-morrow. I expect she'll come in there for them, but she may not think they would be ready so soon. She didn't seem to have the vaguest notion how long it would take me to do them," Mary said, laughing.

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

It was not often they found such a common interest. Mary was thankful anew to Jen Robins, as she sat with her arm round Biddy and repeated everything she could remember, and told her own impressions of Jen.

Biddy giggled at the thought of Jen's safety because of the difficulty of concealing her body if she were murdered; and laughed out at the reference to the "den of kidnappers or coiners."

"You don't look the part, Mary dear! She *must* have talked a lot! I wish I'd been in! Let me see that programme again; let's try to imagine what it will look like! Blue frocks, all alike, did you say? They can't have found a colour that will suit everybody, surely! I'm simply dying to see your fairy godmother, Mary!"

"A godmother with bobbed hair, and twelve years younger than I am, and ever so much taller!" Mary laughed.

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

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

"I don't remember hearing that you ever did worry very much!" her father had hinted.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, you're not that!" Jen was throwing off her fur cap and coat. "Jack's hours older than you! She spoke to me when I was a perfectly new kid, while I still only dared to gaze at you reverently from a distance, because you were a senior! Joan spoke, too, and was jolly and friendly, because she was the May Queen. I was fearfully in awe of you!"

"I'd had a year of queening and was fed up. I was only too glad to leave the new kids to Joan. Of course, if I'd dreamt one of the new kids was going to develop into our Jenny-Wren, I'd have rushed to take her to my heart at once."

"And if I'd only known that the great Queen Joy was going to turn out to be only you, I'd have been a lot less scared than I was," Jen retorted, shaking out her short curls before the

glass.

"You were neither scared nor shy, ever. Who are these interlopers you've taken up?" Joy demanded. "Your mother only said there was a girl you seemed interested in."

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

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

"They like it," Jen assured her heartily. "It cheers them up. I'd never dare to have you here if they wanted quietness. I exert myself day and night to keep them lively. You slip into my room, and I'll come in a sec., and we'll have a talkee-talkee. I want to hear all about to-day from you."

Joy was sitting in the firelight when she returned; Joy in a pretty brown frock with embroidery which matched her bronze-red hair; Joy with a more serious look than usual. Jen dropped on the rug beside her, as Biddy had dropped beside Mary, and said quietly, "You tell first, Joy. My new people can wait. Did you see the Pixie? Didn't she keep you longer than you expected? I'd nearly given you up. Or did you come up to town late? Or did you have a smash-up? Have you punctured Eirene?"

"No, the car's all right, and I came early," Joy said soberly. "It wasn't the Pixie who kept me, though it's always hard to come away from her. We're to go and see her. She's got some new and exciting stunt on, and she wants to show us all about it. She wouldn't tell me a thing. She wants you to see, too."

"How thrilling! She is one for ideas! We'll go, of course," Jen said fervently. "But what made you so late, 'Travellers' Joy'?"

"The kiddies," Joy's face sobered again.

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

"Yes," Joy moved restlessly. "I couldn't bear to take them back again, and say they'd got to go home. They were just in heaven; I hated to tell them it was all over! The Pixie had them waiting when I called at the Club, five of them—poor little twisted things; Jen, it's horrible! Tiny kids, and they'll never be any better! For the first time I wished Eirene was a touring car, or a pantehnicon, or a lorry, so that I could have taken a dozen. We packed them in and I whizzed them off into the country. I thought, with a cargo like that, I'd better keep to roads I knew, so I came out west, though it would have been more exciting to go down into Surrey. But it didn't matter to those kiddies where they went; they were off their heads with excitement, and they thought Hyde Park was the country! We went as far as Uxbridge, and then turned off on the Slough road, and I ran them through the woods near Iver Heath, and showed them the lake in the Black Park; they'd never seen so much water in their lives. I'd only meant to give them a two or three hours' ride; but when I saw it was the great day of their lives, I couldn't bear to cut it short. I took them to the inn and gave them lunch in the garden—eggs and jam and cakes and milk, because I wasn't sure what they could eat. Then we went into a field and picked buttercups,—and if you'd heard the shrieks of excitement! They'd positively never done such a thing before. So then we went and bought a basket at a cottage—where, by the way, they saw white hens, and yellow hens, and a canary in a cage, and ducks, and a black and white cat. More wild excitement! And in the woods we filled the basket—it was a big one—with fir cones, which they thought perfectly wonderful, and with a

heap of those lovely long yellow leaves of sweet chestnut that cover the ground in there; and they've taken them home, and stacks of wild flowers. We had tea—buns and cakes—on logs in the wood; they only had to walk a very few yards, and they were simply crazy to get out and kick about in the leaves. So you'll understand it was quite late, and they were all fagged out, before we got back to Plaistow! I apologised to the Pixie, but I think she understood."

"Joy, what a beautiful day! For them *and* for you!" Jen said warmly. "I can just see how lovely you would be with those children!"

"My dear, I was stiff with shyness! I hadn't the first idea how to speak to them. I longed to have you to help; but there wouldn't have been room for them if you'd been there. I shall sell Eirene; no, I shan't! I shall keep her; but I shall buy a big family car, and take a dozen kids out at a time."

"I don't believe you were shy. You've never been shy yet. And you always have plenty to say."

"Well, I hadn't plenty to-day. I didn't know how to talk to those East-End kiddies."

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

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

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

"Think how they'll want to go again! I'd have liked to promise to take them once a week. But it wouldn't be fair. There are all the others. And I can't go every day. I can't leave aunty alone at Grace-Dieu. And there are other things to do."

"Yes, you mustn't do only one thing," Jen said, with energy. "There's your hostel for working girls; I'm keen on that at the moment, for I've found a girl I want you to ask down to it. How is it getting on, Joy?"

"We're stuck. I can't find just the right house-keeper. She has to be a hostess as well, to make the girls feel at home. She's very important. I won't go ahead till I find her. I'm afraid your girl will have to wait. Tell me about her, Jenny-Wren! I've done my share!"

"She's called The Mary and Dorothy," Jen's eyes laughed in the firelight.

"Jen Robins!"

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

"Will it be so awfully difficult?" Joy laughed.

"My dear, I think it will need an earthquake!" Jen said dramatically. "I haven't dared to tell her! She'd die at the thought. She'd think I was laughing at her, anyway. It will have to be done very, very carefully, and very, very gently, and very, very tactfully. That's why it's a Crusade. But I'm going to make her dance!"

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

"She needs it," Jen said, with conviction. "I feel it in my bones, in every separate one of them, that Mary-Dorothy needs it. I don't know why; I hardly know a thing about her. But I know she needs stirring up. And dancing will do it. I don't say she'll ever do morris; that depends on how keen she gets; but there's no earthly reason she shouldn't be a country-dancer. She's small and slight, and she's got neat ankles, just made for dancing. Her balance isn't good, but perhaps that will come. She looks as if she hadn't ever done a thing in the way of games, or anything active, in her life. I don't suppose she'll be able to run or skip."

"Help!" said Joy. "Aren't you taking on rather a large order, my child?"

"You'd think so, if you'd seen her. I tell you, it's a regular Crusade. But I mean to see it through. It will change her altogether."

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

"She'll think she's too old," Jen said, in a tone of conviction. "She'll be scared stiff; I expect she's horribly self-conscious and shy, and miserable because of it. She looks all shut up inside herself. I saw her in the typewriting office, Joy; and I gave her some violets because she looked so fagged and headachy. She was awfully touched and pleased, and fearfully shy about taking them. So I thought I'd see more of her, and I made an excuse of our programmes, and ran round in the car after tea. Of course, she never dreamt it was an excuse! Well, she was sitting there all alone, darning her sister's stockings, while the kid was out at the cinema with a crowd of chums. Now you know——! After typing in an office all day! If she can't stick the pictures—and I don't blame her for that—she could go out and walk, or something."

"I've an idea you don't walk the streets in London just for the sake of walking," Joy observed. "I fancy it isn't done. But she could get on top of a bus; it wouldn't cost more than the pictures! You think she's the kind of working girl who ought to be folk-dancing in her evenings; the kind we were speaking of last term?"

"Well, don't you think so, too? Think how good it would be for her! The music, and the exercise, and the friends, and the fun of it! Think how it would freshen her up!"

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

"I think that's what I want to do; wake her up," Jen said reflectively. "She struck me as only half alive. I don't wonder; if I had to type all day, and had nothing to look forward to at nights, I should try to be as little alive as I could. It wouldn't seem worth while. But she'll need a lot of persuading, 'Travellers' Joy.' She's thirty; and I think she feels sixty."

"Thirty! H'm! What made her tell you?"

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

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

"I know that. She'll be stiff, and awkward, and awfully shy and frightened of it. But she can get over that, Joy. And just think how she'll enjoy it! Think of living all those years without anything!"

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

"They used to live in the country," Jen said simply. "And if you'd seen her with some bluebells and daffodils I took! They'd just come from home. I meant to send some to the Pixie for her Plaistow people, but I took them to Mary-Dorothy instead, and only kept back a few for Madam, because she loves country things so."

"I took bluebells to the Pixie to-day, so she won't go without. She ran all over the Club with them at once."

"And gave them all away! I thought you'd remember. Mary-Dorothy nearly cried when she saw them, and held out her arms for them; and stuck them up in front of a mirror so that she'd get them twice over! If you'd got the hostel started, I'd have asked you to invite her, Joy. Perhaps later on you will be able to."

"I'll see her first," Joy said evasively.

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

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

"It's not a toy. It will be most useful when I get my class started," Jen said, with dignity. "The pianist's sure not to turn up sometime. Then I shall produce the pipe, and create a sensation."

"You don't think you'll be able to play for dancing, surely?" Joy mocked.

"I don't think; I know!" Jen said calmly. "Daddy always makes me pipe when we have visitors, and they gasp and gaze in wondering admiration, dumb with surprise! Nobody has ever seen a three-hole pipe, or heard of one. When I say I can get eleven notes on it, or more, with semitones, they refuse to believe it, and I have to play scales, and then arpeggios. Those thrill them most, because they see that I get three notes out of one hole, without moving a finger. You can't imagine the excitement that pipe causes. I believe Mary-Dorothy will love folk music."

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

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

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

"Is she all right? And Maidlin?"

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

"I couldn't have come. But I will come for the Coronation. Any news of Cicely coming home?"

"Not a word. But she promised. She'll turn up some day and give us a surprise."

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

"She doesn't know your new address, my dear kid. She's arrived; I saw her for half a sec. on my way to Plaistow this morning. We're to go to lunch with her to-morrow; she told me to

bring you. She's staying in Kensington with the mother-in-law."

"Does she seem different?" Jen asked anxiously.

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

"Thank goodness!" Jen said fervently. "I was afraid she'd come back different!"

"Not she! Her letter telling me where she was staying had an urgent P.S.—'When you come, bring my gymmy and shoes, at the earliest possible moment. For we shall be in town for some time, and I mean to go to classes and meet Jenny-Wren there.' So I handed over her tunic this morning, with the remark that it was hardly the thing for an old married lady."

"And Joan said: 'What about Madam?' I suppose," Jen laughed.

"She did. She said just that. You've evidently kept her well up to date in all your plans and doings. She's coming to your show."

"Oh, I've been writing reams! I always do to Joan. Of course she's coming! I'll make her dance," Jen said happily. "I'm dying to see her again! How we'll talk to-morrow!"

"It will be as bad as Cheltenham," Joy grinned. "And Jack will sit and gaze at Joan, and put in a word now and then. He's still rather shy; except with her."

"Oh, but he's better than he used to be! We did him heaps of good!" Jen said, with conviction.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE WITH BIDDY

Biddy Devine went flying home from college next day. It was all important that she should get in before Mary. Mary was unobservant and wrapped up in her own thoughts, but she woke up now and then, and if this happened to be a wide-awake day she might think of asking why Biddy's left arm carried a pile of books and her right hand an apparently empty case.

There were things in the case which Mary must not see on any account. Biddy sighed in relief when she found the door still locked; and entering, shut herself into her own little room, and proceeded to unpack the mysterious case and put its contents out of sight.

With a wistful sigh of delight and anticipation, she shook out a soft pink dress, and hung it in her cupboard, though it was not crushed. There were other things in the case, too; she put them guiltily into a drawer, knowing only too well what Mary would feel if she knew.

She had been very strongly tempted, and she had yielded. It was only for once, she told herself; and it was a very great occasion. To-night she was to go to Doris's birthday party, and Doris was seventeen, and so grown-up that Biddy, who was only just fifteen, though big for her age, felt uncomfortably childish beside her. They would all be very grown-up to-night, and Doris had said teasingly that Biddy would be the baby of the party.

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

She was not practised in double-dealing, however, and felt very uncomfortable as she went, at the sound of Mary's key, to help to prepare tea. She had not been in the habit of deceiving her sister; it had not been necessary. Hitherto she had gone her own way, and Mary, after more or less opposition, had given in. There had been occasional 'rows,' but all had been fair and above board. Biddy was not as happy in the prospect of her party as she had expected to be, and almost wished she had been strong-minded and kept to her first idea of wearing last summer's frock. "Poor old Mary never dreams I'm going to do anything else!" she thought restlessly. "But I don't know how she can! The thing's fearfully faded, and hideously short. I'd look a perfect freak. And they'll all be dressed up!"

She was awkward and unlike herself at tea, however; guiltily expecting at any moment some question she would not be able to answer.

"The violet girl didn't come for her programmes," Mary remarked. "Perhaps she'll come round to fetch them to-night. You won't be late, Biddy? They've promised to see you home, you said? I don't like you going out like this without me, even if it is to Doris's. I'd rather you didn't do it again."

"Perhaps I won't, Mary," Biddy's voice was subdued. "But it's her birthday and she's always been nice to me. I couldn't possibly say no. I won't be later than I can help."

She hurried away to dress, and Mary sat dreaming and thinking. Biddy had seemed strange and unlike herself to-night; was she just excited over the party? Mary felt vaguely troubled; she did not like Doris, or the circle into which she had led Biddy, but had not found it possible to stop the friendship. "If I had been more of a companion to Biddy, would this have happened?" Mary asked herself sombrely. "She's had to find her friends outside, because there was nothing for her at home. But how could I be a companion to her? Would it have been the same if Mother had been here?—I will try harder! She said perhaps she wouldn't go again. If I

could make her want something better than Doris's crowd, and cinemas every night, that would stop her more quickly than scolding her and forbidding her to go. I wonder if I could help her to get ready? She'll be coming for me to hook her frock. I'll go and offer instead."

She went across to Biddy's door. To her amazement it was locked. "Biddy!" she called, startled. "Is anything the matter? I came to help you dress. Why have you locked the door?"

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

She threw open the door. "Nice of you to offer, but you're too late. I'm nearly ready; how do you like the general effect? I simply couldn't go looking like a kid, you know, Mary!"

For one long moment Mary stared at her. Biddy, but a grown-up Biddy, and prettier than Mary had ever dreamed she would be. Biddy in the pink frock, which hung in soft folds nearly to her ankles; with her pretty brown hair done up in the very newest style; how had she learned to do that? Mary could not have done it for her to save her life. Biddy in last summer's white shoes and stockings, with a string of imitation pearls on her bare neck, and a powder-puff in her hand.

With a nervous little laugh she turned to the mirror again, but made no attempt to hide those tell-tale things lying before it. "You may as well know the worst, old thing. Get it over! Say something; swear at me! You'll die, if you don't."

"You've been putting on paint." Mary came forward slowly, feeling sick. "You know how I hate it. No wonder you'd locked the door!"

"Oh, but you're positively Early Victorian!" Biddy protested. "Everybody does it, Mary dear. Everybody but you! You must know that, whether you'll admit it or not."

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

Biddy laughed, but with a touch of nervousness. "No, old dear, I didn't! It's Vivien Turner's. It's perfectly new; she only wore it once or twice, and then her father died and she didn't go to any more parties. You like Vivien; you know you liked her when she came here to tea. You said she was quite the best of our crowd! She's an awfully jolly girl, really, Mary. I thought it was so sporting of her to offer to lend me her frock. She saw I was worried when Doris asked me, so I told her I hadn't a dress and I couldn't possibly go in last summer's faded old rag; it would be horribly short for me now, too. I've grown a couple of inches since I had it. It wouldn't have been decent. I wondered you never thought of it."

"I didn't know it was such a big party," Mary said dully. "You never explained. I thought, of course, you would go in your blue Sunday frock. It's pretty, and still quite good."

"Oh, you dear old fossil!" Biddy said lightly. "You're only half awake! My dear, Doris has been talking about her new frock for weeks! I've been awfully relieved to know I had Vivien's to fall back on. I'd have been utterly miserable but for good old Vi."

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

Biddy glanced at herself in the glass. "I don't look only fifteen!" she said triumphantly. "Oh, don't be silly, Mary! Don't start to make a fuss now! I'm glad you came in; I've been wanting to tell you how decent Vi had been, but I wasn't sure how you would take it. But I did want to show you the frock. Isn't it simply sweet?"

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

"Mary, you're simply an idiot! As if I would! Besides, it would be hideously unkind to Vi! She'd be awfully disappointed. Oh, don't talk silly rot! Are you going to kiss me good-bye and wish me a jolly time?"

"You're not going in that frock." Mary moved towards the door.

With one leap, Biddy caught up hat and big coat and handbag, and reached the door at the same moment. "Don't be mad, Mary! You know you can't stop me. Of course I'm going. Are you going to have a stand-up fight over it?"

Mary's blood was up. "I won't have it, Biddy, it's hateful of you," and she clung to the handle.

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

"Sorry, old thing! But you can't stop me that way. You gave me leave to go; it's no use going back on it now. Don't worry, Mary; I won't be late if I can help it. And I'll be awfully good for weeks and weeks! If you think about it, you'll see I couldn't possibly back out now. I hope you won't be dull. Remember, I'm going to stay in and darn my stockings all to-morrow evening; I'll do yours, too, if you like. Good-bye for the present! Don't be too mad with me, old thing!" and she ran off down the long staircase.

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

When there was no more to be done, she went back to the sitting-room, and stood helplessly before the fire. It was no time to escape into dreams; that would be no comfort to-night. For once she was stirred to the depths by the discovery she had made—the discovery of the lengths to which Biddy would go, and of her own helplessness.

"There's nothing I can do! I can't control her, and she's only fifteen! She can do anything she likes; and she knows it. And she doesn't care that it breaks my heart. That's the only way I could have had any hold over her. If she cared about me she wouldn't do these things. I haven't even made her care. I've failed in every single way. I've been blind while she was growing up, and now she's got beyond me. I don't see what I'm here for at all! Why am I such a failure? . . . Could I be any different? I suppose it's too late. Biddy will never care about me now. I've missed my chance with her somehow, and it won't come back. Where have I gone wrong? How have I failed?" Her head dropped on the mantelpiece beside the daffodils from Yorkshire, and she stood shaken with sobbing.

CHAPTER V

MARY-DOROTHY HEARS THE PIPES OF PAN

Mary, standing brokenly by the fireplace, suddenly raised her head and listened incredulously. From somewhere outside came a sound she had never heard before, clear, high, silvery notes—a merry jiggling tune. She turned and stared doubtfully at the window; but it was nearer than the street, four flights down. At the door? It seemed to be close at hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joy’s keen eyes were taking in a great deal, though she was keeping in the background. Mary felt her gaze and shrank, and would not look up.

Jen laughed and produced her new “toy.” It was a little brown wooden pipe, with two holes in the front, and one at the back for the thumb. “It’s an Old English morris pipe; what the morris men used to dance to, you know. Shall I pipe you a morris? That was ‘The Old Mole’ I played outside the door,—a country-dance. This is a morris!”

She followed “The Buffoon” with “Hunting the Squirrel,” and “Glorishears,” and Mary listened entranced, and gazed at her in breathless wonder, and forgot to keep her face hidden.

Joy drew her own conclusions. “She’s been crying because the kid will go out and leave her alone. Must be a little beast! And yet I don’t know; I used to do it, in my own way. I’m not the one to talk! They couldn’t chain me down. You can’t expect a kid of fifteen to stay at home all the time, unless there’s something very jolly to keep her there. I wonder what bait Mary-Dorothy has been using? I had my piano; and school. I had to work, because I was the Queen.”

“Oh, that’s delightful!” Mary exclaimed, as Jen paused for breath. “Are those your old folk tunes? They make one want to dance! But how do you do it? How can you get all those notes out of three holes?”

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

"Oh, but the dances are brainy!" Joy said quickly. "Look at 'Spring Garden' and 'Lull Me' and 'Chelsea' and 'Newcastle!' Look at the Ilmington dances! Their brains were all right in Elizabethan times! I say, Jenny-Wren, you are getting on with the new toy! You almost made me get up and dance! Didn't you see me beginning to stamp and clap in that last one?"

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

"You only use your left hand?" Mary questioned, the shadow that Biddy had caused withdrawing into the background, though it did not vanish. "Is it always played so, or are you left-handed?"

"Oh, always! There was a little drum as well, and the right hand struck that; it was hung from the left wrist; *that* was the position! There are pictures of men piping and drumming at the same time. But I haven't a drum yet."

She put the pipe to her lips. "Country-dances! 'Lady in the Dark'—'Goddesses;' oh, listen to this, Joy! On all the same notes as 'Lady,' but so different! Miss Devine, this is a morris jig, called 'I'll go and enlist for a Sailor.' Isn't it a gorgeous tune? But you should see it danced by men!"

"I say, Jenny-Wren, you can play!" Joy exclaimed admiringly.

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

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

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

Joy, sitting on the edge of the table, was watching Mary's rapt face. "Why doesn't the silly woman go to good concerts? Oh, but I suppose they cost a bit; and I guess the kid's always wanting money for the pictures! I don't believe she'll ever dance; she's far too stodgy. But she'll love the music; she loves it already."

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

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

"Can't you play it?" Mary laughed at the dismay in her tone. "Oh, please don't trouble! I only thought I'd like to hear it. It doesn't matter in the least."

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

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

"I avoid them whenever I can," Jen admitted solemnly. "I can't jerk 'Mary and Dorothy' up, 'Travellers' Joy.' It's up on the roof already. It would squeal itself out of sight if it went any higher. It's a most unfair tune! Goes right up as high as I can get, and then wants to drop away below my lowest note! I call it absolutely greedy. This is the nearest I can do for you, Miss Devine!"

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

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

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

"Won't you come along with us for an hour and watch our classes?" Joy suggested; her eyes had been curiously on Mary whenever they were not on Jen and the pipe. "We're on our way to classes now. I think you'd find it interesting, and you'd hear more of the music. My little car's downstairs; if you'll slip on a coat we'll run you round with us."

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

Joy rose from the table and loosened her big coat to show the navy blue tunic underneath. "We thought we'd come in our legs, as we were in our own car; it would hardly do for trains or buses! I was with a friend who teaches dancing yesterday, Miss Devine, and I offered to take her home in the car, if she'd hurry and get changed. And she said, 'I shan't change. I'll just put on my cloak. I'm going home in my legs.' And she went home in her legs. So we thought we'd come in ours and not bother with skirts."

"Oh, but she's tiny, just a Pixie! It looks much worse for you and me! There's more of us! You don't mind tunics, Miss Devine? Everybody wears them."

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

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

"Would it be possible for my little sister to join your club?" Mary begged anxiously. "She has nothing of the kind, and it would be so good for her, and such a joy to her. The tunics gave me courage to ask you, because she often says she wishes she had a chance to wear hers as she used to do at school. She doesn't go to gymnasium or anything now, and I'm sure she is missing it, though I think she hardly realises it. I thought, perhaps, if your club was for girls of about her age, if you could take her in, it would give her something new to do."

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

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

"I'm troubled about her. Indeed, I'm desperately unhappy about Biddy," Mary broke out. "I ought not to trouble you with my worries, but you've come just at the moment when I'm most needing help, and it seems as if you could, perhaps, give me help in the best way. I don't know what to do. Things seem to have got to their very worst to-night. You must have seen I was upset when you came in. We'd just been having a row.—Forgive me for troubling you with all this!"

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

“What’s the row with the kid?” Joy asked bluntly. “Can’t you manage her?”

Mary stood with bent head, and spoke quickly. “She goes to a college for shorthand and typewriting; she was at a good boarding-school until two years ago. She’s made friends with a set I don’t like—girls and boys; and she’s out with them night after night, at the cinema chiefly. I’m no companion for her; we’re very fond of one another, but chiefly because we have no one else. We’re all that are left, so of course we stick together. But Biddy was away from home for years while she was growing, and when she came home at last I’d grown past being a companion for her. In years, I mean; I sometimes think she’s a great deal older than I am in some ways. She’s determined, and she’s pretty, and these friends flatter her; and I simply don’t count.”

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

Mary went on swiftly, “I’m not complaining of what has happened, on my own account. I must have been to blame somehow, though I’m not sure how. But I am anxious, and frightened, about Biddy. She’s only fifteen, and in some ways just a baby. And she won’t take warnings from me. To-night”—she drew a sharp breath; the thought of that scene still hurt;—“to-night she was going to her friend’s party. I found her ready to go, dressed in an evening frock borrowed from a friend, unknown to me, with her hair put up, and putting on paint and powder. I said all I could, and forbade her to go, unless she went in her own clothes. She’s stronger than I am, and—and she went in spite of me. Then you came. You couldn’t help seeing.—I thought if I could interest Biddy in you, and your club, and your dancing, she might make new friends who would be better for her. If she had new, healthy interests, all this might drop away from her. It isn’t good for her; she reads trashy novelettes, and knows all about the latest sensational cases in the papers; the girls evidently talk them over in every detail. I’m dreading the time when Biddy begins earning for herself. She’ll want to go to dances every night; she’d go now, if I would give her the money for it, and for the clothes she’d need. She has a healthy side; she’s not silly all through; but there’s nothing to keep that side of her alive, and it’s dying for want of use.”

“The side that wants to get into a tunic and kick about—play football in a gym—or dance ‘Rigs o’ Marlow’!” said Joy. “Miss Devine, I believe you’ve hit on the thing your kiddy needs. Introduce her to ‘Pop goes the Weasel’ and ‘We won’t go home till Morning’; then get her on to ‘Laudnum Bunches’ and ‘Blue-eyed Stranger,’ and you’ll solve your problem.”

“And ‘Flamborough,’ and perhaps ‘Earsdon!’ She’d love sword-dancing,” Jen cried eagerly. “Oh, Miss Devine, well start a crusade to save her!”—her eyes flashed a warning look at Joy, but Joy was tactful and did not refer to the other “crusade.” “I’d love to help!” Jen went on eagerly. “I’ll see that Biddy joins the club, if it has to be a condition of my taking on the class! You bring her to the show, and well try to make her keen!”

“I think she will be keen,” Mary said gratefully. “She has done two or three of your dances at school, and seems to have enjoyed them. But she was surprised to hear of grown-up people doing them; she looks on them as more for children.”

Joy’s eyes met Jen’s, and a reminiscent laugh broke from them both. “For children! Think of four hundred of us at Cheltenham!” Jen chuckled. “An awfully childish lot, aren’t we?”

“And six hundred at Chelsea! Oh, the superiority of fifteen! I doubt if Biddy’s old enough to appreciate folk-dances yet!”

"We can try," Jen said hopefully. "Perhaps she'll grow up! But you must come with her, Miss Devine. That's understood; I insist on it! I'll only have Biddy if you'll come too. I don't think she ought to go and leave you alone every night, and I'll not have my classes taking her away from you."

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

"Oh, do you think you will? It sounds awfully dull! But we'll see. Of course I want you to come. You know, Miss Devine," and Jen spoke with a serious air, as though the twelve years' advantage in age had been on her side, "you and Biddy haven't had enough interests in common. You must insist on sharing in this new thing from the first. Don't let her go into it without you. She mustn't leave you behind."

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

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

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

"All the same," Joy said decisively, when Mary, startled and eager, had hurried away to her room, "there's something wrong. I don't know yet what it is, but there's something. I'm awfully sorry for her, and all that, but at her age she ought to be able to manage the kid. You wouldn't catch me letting a girl of fifteen—well, say Rosamund or Maidlin!—boss me and please herself."

"Oh, but you're different, Joy! You're determined, and strong-minded, and——"

"And all sorts of horrible things! Perhaps I am, but I'd manage this little monkey of a Biddy, anyway. I think Mary-Dorothy's been too soft with her, if you ask me. I don't understand her. She's not—not got force of character enough! That's what's wrong with her. She's soft altogether. I wonder why?"

"She can't cope with Biddy, that's quite evident. I think it's rather sad. We've got to help her." Jen stowed the beloved morris pipe in a big pocket and rose resolutely. "She's asked me to help. I mean to see her through!"

CHAPTER VI

THE RETURN OF THE PRESIDENT

"Now, Miss Devine, you'll have to tuck into a corner and watch!" Jen explained. "For we shall be far too busy to talk. Once the music starts, we'll forget all about you. You mustn't mind that. But there'll be plenty to see. For one thing, you'll very likely see Joy and me pulled up for mistakes. It's ages since I went to regular classes; since last August, in fact! I had an illness, and wasn't allowed to dance for some months. And I've only had occasional chances since."

"You don't look as if you'd ever been ill in your life." Mary glanced at the happy, healthy face admiringly.

"Oh, I'm as well as I ever was! But that's why I cut my hair," Jen said lightly. "I wouldn't let it grow again, because it was so jolly for dancing."

"I smashed her up in a side-car accident," Joy said abruptly. "Don't you wonder she's willing to drive with me again?"

Mary glanced at her face, and found it changed, set and strained, as if at painful memories. She had been admiring the strong grip of the wheel and the skilful guidance through the traffic. "I'm sure it wasn't your fault," she ventured.

"Oh, yes, it was!"——

"Joy, you are an idiot!" Jen said irritably. "I do wish you'd forget! You know I hate to hear you speak of it.—Miss Devine, don't take any notice of her. Listen to me instead! We don't know who will be teaching to-night. If you hear one of us shriek 'Madam!' very joyfully, you'll know it's the one I told you of, who's going to dance at my show. Here we are! Now will you come up while we change, or slip into the hall at once?"

"I'll come with you, if I may. Will they mind me looking on?"

"Not a scrap. My husband—I call her Jacky-boy—won't be here, because it's morris and she's still only an elementary at morris! This is an advanced class; though I don't claim to be an advanced student! But I've got my elementary certificate, so I want to go on to new work."

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

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

Joy seemed in no way surprised to meet herself in the flesh. "Hallo, old thing! You've got here first. Have you spoken to Madam?"

"No, is she here? She wasn't when I arrived. Topping! I'd better go and ask if she'll have me."

"Oh, wait for us! We won't be a sec.!" Jen pleaded. "Where's your old man, Joan? Isn't he coming?"

"He's downstairs. Jenny-Wren, you wouldn't expect to find him in here?" Joan teased. "It's a ladies' dressing-room!"

"Oh, well, I suppose not. I say, Joy, you might explain Joan to Miss Devine. She thinks she's had too much tea and is seeing double. They are frightfully alike, aren't they, Miss Devine?"

"My cousin, Mrs. Raymond," Joy explained. "Everybody thinks we're twins, but we're not."

"You can tell them apart by Joan's ring, now she's gone and got married." Jen was sitting on the floor, changing to low black slippers with no heels. "When they first went to school, Joy wore a silver medal, because she was the May Queen; as Joan had no medal, the girls didn't get them mixed. But the next year, if the school didn't go and choose Joan for the Queen! So she had a medal, too, and then there was no difference at all. Joan's just had a honeymoon; that's why she's so brown. She's only just got home from abroad. I'm ready! Shall we go down?"

As they entered the big hall, Mary Devine shrank back shyly, and found a seat in a corner; but watched everything with keenly interested eyes. These girls, happy, wealthy, full of joy in life, and music, and laughter, and friendship, were a new type to her; in her narrow life she had never come in touch with anything quite so young and radiant. It was for something like this she had been starving; something, some one to lift her out of her rut and fill her with new interests. They fascinated her; she watched each one of them without a trace of envy, unconsciously absorbing the atmosphere of happy life which radiated from them all,—Jen, the youngest, full of eager enthusiasms, but with a deeply-understanding nature full of kindness; Joan, obviously newly married and very happy—the look she gave her tall husband as he met her at the foot of the stairs was evidence of that;—Joy? She was not so sure of Joy yet. Joy was less easy to read; it would take a little while to get to know her.

Captain Raymond, wearing flannels, had joined the three girls in their blue tunics and green girdles, and all entered the hall together; and Mary, keeping in the background, found herself forgotten, as Jen had foretold. She much preferred it to be so, and found her corner and looked on undisturbed, with much satisfaction.

Joy and Jen, reinforced by a black-haired, blue-eyed girl whom they hailed as "Avice," caught hands and surrounded Joan and her husband, and swept them towards the platform. "Will you have us in your class? The whole lot of us? Do you think you can stand us?" cried Jen.

"One of us is an old married lady, pretending she's a schoolgirl again," Joy added.

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

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

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

"Well, if you'll all be very good, I'll take you on trial. I suppose I've got to call you Mrs. Raymond? I shall *never* remember, you know!"

"Call me anything you like; whatever comes first! It took us a long time to call you anything different," Joan retorted, laughing.

"You look jolly well on it, anyway. Have you had a good time? Glad to see you again, Captain Raymond! I shall expect very good behaviour and very beautiful dancing from you

all, you know.”

“O-o-oh!” Jen pretended to tremble at the knees. “I’m not up to this grade, please, Ma’am! Don’t turn me down! I wanted to come with the rest of the crowd, but I *don’t know* all the dances! I’m simply terrified!”

“You’ll have to try very hard, or I shall turn you out,” but Madam’s voice and eyes were less terrifying than her words. “You’re expected to know everything in this grade! Perhaps if you’re very good Miss Everett will take care of you.”

“Be nice and kind to me, Avvie!” Jen took the black-haired girl by the arm. “You know tons more than I do! I am so glad you’ve come home from school!”

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

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

“You’re wasting a lot of time,” she remarked presently. “I’m not going to make up your sets for you. Can’t you count six? I never saw such slow people in my life.”

The wavering ones came to hasty decisions and skipped into the nearest uncompleted sets. Jen, realising suddenly that she and Avie Everett were first couple, made a dash to get behind Joan and Captain Raymond; and Joy, turned out of her place, awoke to the fact that she would have to be Number One or Two and was without a partner.

“You boulder!” she said indignantly to Jen. “Don’t imagine she won’t see you there! You tower quite two feet above Joan!”

“Oh, what a lie!” Jen murmured. “Hook somebody quickly! Madam’s got her eye on us. Oh, here’s that Writing Person; she’ll do! She knows her dances, anyway.”

“Does them horribly, though,” Avie grumbled. “She’s no good!”—as Jen made eager signs to someone who had just come in.

“Oh, but it’s useful to have somebody who gets there somehow, no matter how she does it! You’ll probably see me wandering about outside the set and have to haul me in again. I always get lost in Field Town heys.”

Avie laughed. “Remember the side-step, and the ‘show.’ ”

“Goodness! I’d forgotten all about feet!”

Avie collapsed at this, then pulled herself together under Madam’s astonished eye.

“Is everybody ready *at last*? Then start—‘Once To Yourself.’ ”

“And for goodness’ sake, remember it’s morris, Jen Robins! You’ve got to think about feet! Mind your Foot-Up!”

Jen gave her an agonised glance of entreaty. But the introductory strain of music was over, and Avie, with four business-like backward stamps, was into the dance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's better! Now start again. And suppose you think this time."

The second attempt was more successful. Avice kindly kept Jen right throughout the dance, and, at Joan's fervent: "Thanks awfully! Just saved us, Avvie!" made her directions loud enough to be heard by the whole set. The Writer of Books, who knew "Step Back," and also knew Madam, waited hopefully for comments at the end; very little escaped Madam's eagle eye, she knew.

"Half-Rounds!" said Avice. "*Inside* foot, idiot!" to Jen.

"Oh! But why?" gasped Jen, quite breathless, after so much "side-step in position" and so many heys. "Oh, what a brute of a thing! How did you get there?" and she scuffled into her place, hopelessly lost.

"Outward turn to go back; left!" jerked Avice, "and four capers to end."

"End? Gracious! Does it stop there? But nothing else does! It's—it's not done!" gasped Jen, who had expected still more figures and heys.

Avice laughed; she and the Writing Person were the only two in that set who had remembered to finish their dance; the other four had all been taken by surprise. "My dear child, this thing's all exceptions. Haven't you grasped that yet?"

"Fancy beginning with it!" Joy groaned.

"Suppose you do your Rounds again. And this set might think for themselves this time, and not let Miss Everett do all the work for them."

The Writing Person laughed. "Trust her to see! She never misses a thing."

"I'm not going to tell you once this time, children," Avice announced. "You can jolly well get in all the muddles you like."

"I don't know why it is, but Half-Rounds is always too much for you all," Madam remarked scathingly at the end. "Get sticks and do 'Bobby and Joan'; and be careful this time."

"It's all the same; well, just a bit different, but it's Field Town," Avice condescended to warn Jen. "Galley in the Foot-Up—whole galley this time! Hop-backs everywhere else; inside foot for Rounds, and ends on sticks and half-hey."

"Thanks a billion times, old thing! That's what I call being a real pal!" Jen murmured gratefully. "I've only grasped a quarter of all that, but I'll keep one eye on you!"

"You tap me, remember. Evens tap sticks first. Yes, I know it's backwards, but it's right."

"I expect the old chap who taught it to the Director was drunk!" Jen said indignantly.

"I've always said the Sherborne one must have been," and then Avice stood ready, stick in hand waiting for the "Once To Yourself."

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

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

"Holidays don't agree with you," Madam had heard, and responded unexpectedly. "And marriage certainly doesn't agree with Joan!"

"I haven't exactly been thinking about morris traditions for the last three months," Joan told her laughing. "There are such lots of other things!"

"I know. Isn't it awful?" Madam, newly married herself, agreed with laughing eyes. "Now get up and do 'Rigs.' I'm not going to tell you anything about it."

"Avvie! Come here, Avvie! What tradition is it?" Jen implored, in frantic tones.

"Jenny-Wren, Madam will turn you out in a minute!" Joy said severely. "It will be awfully chilly out on the stairs!"

"But I have forgotten it! I'm not ragging!" Jen said indignantly.

"My dear little child, think of your own old back kitchen in Yorkshire, and the mummings, and *me*! And burglars! It will all come back if you'll only keep cool and ponder it calmly," Avice said maternally. "You get so fitty!"

"Oh—that! Right-o! This thing!" Jen's arm and stick flashed wildly up and down.

Avice nodded, her eyes dancing, for the class was waiting and Madam's amused eyes were on them.

"You've got it, Miss Robins. Now suppose you take your place and we'll start. We're all waiting for you."

Jen sprang to her place, scarlet with amused embarrassment; then did a lightning change with Avice to get the easier position.

"Coward! Funk!" said Avice scornfully, and Madam laughed and nodded to the pianist.

From her corner, Mary Devine was watching in keen interest and delight. This evening was in every way a new experience to her. Some of the morris movements were rather terrifying in their apparent difficulty, notably the galleys; but she remembered Jen had said this was an advanced class. To her unaccustomed eyes the dances looked very complicated; when the whole room broke into winding "heys" she thought they were lost and was amazed when they found their places again. Occasionally some one did not find her place, or made a wrong pass time after time; and once Madam, after repeatedly giving the same direction without getting the result she wanted, ejaculated, "*Bad woman!*" and springing from the platform went to push the puzzled girl into her place, with an energetic, "There! *Now* do you see?"

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

There were stories lying behind all these girls, too. The accident to Jen, at which Joy had hinted, holding herself responsible;—the appearance of the bride and bridegroom, he evidently a soldier, both plainly old friends of Joy and Jen, and of Madam also;—the black-haired, blue-eyed girl's references to something in the past, something with burglars in it! Mary found herself wishing she knew about all these things.

And then something else happened. The first stick-tapping of "Rigs" was in progress, and Jen's curls were flying wildly up and down as she hopped and held her stick up for Avice to strike, when she missed her step and her turn to tap,—Joan gasped out an astounded exclamation,—Joy, staring wildly across the room, hit the Writing Person a sharp blow on the little finger; and the whole set went to pieces. Avice smothered a laugh, and struck on valiantly at Jen's wobbling stick; the Writer and Captain Raymond gazed in astonished dismay at their disorganised opposites, whose sticks were anywhere but at "chin-level."

Madam was preparing some stormy comments for the end of the dance, and frowning as the three even numbers of the side lost their places completely in their hey, when from the doorway came another girl who had just arrived, and stepped up on the platform to speak to her; another girl in blue tunic and green girdle which matched Jen's and Joy's and Joan's; a big sturdy masterful girl with dark brown curly hair and sunburnt face, looking, as most of them did, several years younger than her age.

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

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

"I'm not; I mean, I wasn't," Cicely said placidly. "I've only just arrived. But we shall be in London or at Broadway End for some time, and I'm dying for some dancing. I got the list of classes from Avvie, and thought I'd come along. Dick will be here presently; he had to see a man on the way. I'm so glad it's your class! Avvie couldn't tell me who would be teaching."

"You've come straight from Ceylon?" Madam was leaving her class to go its own way.

"For May-Day, of course. I promised to be home. Isn't it ripping to have Joan back, too? How well she looks! It does feel homelike to see all that crowd again!"

"It feels like Cheltenham——"

Then the dance came to an end. As the music stopped and everybody faced up, Madam said grimly: "Yes! Well, I don't think much of that, you know. You'd better do it again,—and I'd better watch them this time," she added, for Cicely's benefit. "But I saw a good lot of it, and it wasn't good."

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

"Stop a moment!" she said to the pianist. "Change sides, everybody. That's better. Now, think what you're doing this time. 'Once to Yourself,' " and she turned to Cicely to make some remark.

"Think!" hissed Joy. "And we've not seen the President since January! Is it likely?"

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

"Didn't you know she was home, really?" The Writing Person looked at Joy. "And you haven't seen her since she was married? Oh, that's hard lines! She ought to come in here! Could I clear out and make room for her?"

"Not now. We'll have to see this through. We'll mob her at the end. Madam will have to let us rest."

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

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

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

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

"We nearly hurled our sticks at you! Didn't you see we were all on the point of exploding?" Jen demanded, in righteous wrath.

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

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

“I was enjoying their suffering,” the President laughed. “Jen’s face was priceless, and Joy’s was one better still.”

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

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

“Oh, she said you must come in! She knows it’s your place,” Joy said eagerly. “She said she’d clear out.”

“But it’s not fair. Isn’t there room for me somewhere else?”

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

“Oh, but I’m not dancing this! Twice of ‘Rigs’ just about kills me. I couldn’t possibly do any more Headington till I’ve had a rest. Besides, if you don’t dance with them, they’ll all be doing it backwards in the effort to keep their eyes on you. Please go in in your own place! I was only making up their set.”

“I say, don’t you mind, really? Thanks awfully!”

“My ‘Laudnum Bunches’ needs all the practice it can get,” the Writing Person assured her. “But not on top of two turns of ‘Rigs’ straight off. I love Headington, but it just about kills me.”

“It’s awfully decent of you to say so! I don’t believe it, of course. But I’ll go in with them, to ease their minds. Thanks hugely!” and Cicely went to take her place beside Joy.

CHAPTER VII

“OLD MARRIED LADIES”

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

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

“I?” Mary gave her a startled look. “Oh, I never could! It’s the first time I’ve even seen anything of the kind. Miss Robins and Miss Shirley invited me to come and watch.”

“What do you think of it? But I can see you’re enjoying it. Why don’t you join a class?”

“I never could,” Mary said again, but her voice had a wistful note. “I’ve never done anything of the kind. But I’m hoping my little sister will. I think she’ll love it.”

“I’d never done anything of the kind, either, till all this got hold of me, about three years ago. Not a thing; not gym, nor tennis, nor even cycling. I went long country walks; that was all. It was all new to me. I don’t see why you shouldn’t.”

She did not add, “I’m older than you are. If I can do it, you can,” but she implied it.

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

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

“Oh, no! I’m a shorthand-typist.”

“You’d find it a jolly change from that. I type a lot myself,” the Writing Person explained. “When I start, it’s a stunt of seventy or eighty thousand words; some job! This is a great relief after typing all day. I believe you’d love it. You could begin with country-dancing; it’s far simpler and less strenuous. There’s no need to do morris unless you want certificates so that you can teach; or unless you simply can’t help it. I suppose you saw what happened just now, when Miss Hobart walked in. It was mean of her! They were all simply writhing under Madam’s eye.”

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

“I saw them all at the Summer School last August, but didn’t get to know them. There were plenty of themselves, and they made heaps of friends, and the two men appeared and got engaged to two of the girls. I never spoke to any of them, but I used to watch them all. Then last term I made friends with Jen Robins at these classes. They were a dancing club at school, years ago, and Miss Hobart was the president and taught the dances to the rest. The two Shirley girls, Joan and Joy, are cousins, though they look like twins. Joan owns a beautiful old ruined Abbey down in Oxfordshire, left to her by Joy’s grandfather, who left his huge house, the Hall, to Joy. If you hear Joan—she’s Mrs. Raymond now—called Abbey-Girl, that’s the reason; she’s lived in the Abbey for years, or near it. She met Captain Raymond at the dancing school, and Cicely Hobart met Mr. Everett, and they were all married this spring. The Everetts have been abroad ever since; none of the rest had seen her since her wedding-day. So you can imagine the consternation when she walked in, in her tunic, in the middle of ‘Rigs!’ And you’ll understand why I thought it best to clear out and say I really must have a rest! They’ll go on talking all the evening.”

The dance was over, and Madam's comments had been listened to politely, though she doubted if they had made any very deep impression on one of her sets of morris dancers, at least. Now the Abbey crowd were gathered round Cicely again, each girl trying to make herself heard above the others, Jen particularly insisting on telling all about her "show" and enlisting the President's help as a dancer.

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

"Miss Everett. No, she's Cicely Hobart's little sister-in-law. I've no doubt she knew the President's plan for to-night, but of course she never said a word about it. She's a chum of Jen Robins's. They have some joke about burglars, but I can't tell you what it is. I only know that whenever they meet one of them says 'burglars' and the other laughs." The Writing Person slipped her arms into her brown coat and pulled it straight, and went up on to the platform to speak to Madam, who was watching the reunion with amused, sympathetic eyes.

"Great excitement! Don't those two look well? Marriage seems to suit them. But Joan doesn't exactly look like an old married lady, does she? That's what Joy calls her."

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

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

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

Madam laughed. "'Princess Royal!' " she said, and the class sprang joyfully to their feet.

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

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

"It's wonderful, but very—very surprising!" Mary confessed. "It must be glorious to be able to do it."

"It is, rather. The music simply makes you."

"That last tune will haunt me, I think. But they all will."

"That's why I got my little pipe. I simply had to play them when I felt like it, and you can't take a piano about with you.—You've been making friends! I saw you had some one to speak to, so I knew you were all right. Did she tell you she writes books for girls, Miss Devine? Your sister may know them."

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

Jen laughed. "She writes the books first, though. Joy Shirley's children have several of them. Oh, didn't you know Miss Shirley had twins, about a month ago? They're great big girls already, fifteen or thereabouts. She keeps them down in the country, at Joan's Abbey. Adopted, of course," Jen added seriously. "One of them is to be the new May Queen at our old school. We're all going down to help crown her. Cicely and Joan and Joy are all Queens; I'm Joan's Maid of Honour. Joy's being awfully good to those two kiddies, and they have a ripping time. One of them's an heiress, and Joy's bringing her up, because she was an heiress, too, so she knows what it's like. Now I'm going to ask the Writing Lady to dance with me. Dick Everett has arrived, so as Cicely and Joan have husbands, if Joy takes Avvie Everett and

I get in an outsider, we'll be eight, and we can have a set of our own. Perhaps Madam will be an angel and give us Running Set."

Whether Madam was an angel or not, Mary did not know till afterwards; but she saw that the eight friends managed to dance together for the greater part of the next hour, and all looked supremely happy and pleased with life. The varied figures bewildered her, until she grasped the fact that each couple in turn was doing the same thing all the way round the set, with a lot of running round in couples with crossed hands in between each section; she saw the difference in the figure, when the "Wild Goose Chase" began, and laughed in spite of herself at the exuberance of the dancers. Jen's delight and Joy's excitement were so obvious; Avice was laughing most of the time; the other two couples were occasionally hazy and had to be prompted, but recovered and found their places again very quickly. "Wind up the Ball Yarn" was another surprise; then with a final promenade round the set the dancers fell exhausted into chairs, panting and breathless; and Madam said grimly to the pianist: "I thought twenty minutes of that would do them all in. Even Joy Shirley and the President are silent at last.—I suppose you haven't danced that since we danced with you, that night in the barn in January?" she asked of Cicely.

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

"It was frightfully bad. I shan't let you go on another time. But you looked so happy that it seemed brutal to worry you by telling you your do-sis were all over the place, wilder and wilder every time. Next week we'll have it done properly," Madam said cuttingly. "Now you can be thinking out 'Chelsea Reach' and 'The Fine Companion.' "

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, as to that—!" Jen was equally emphatic on this point. "You've got to forget Biddy and everything else, and just enjoy yourself. If you once stop to think how you look, and what people think about you, you're done for. You can't think of both yourself and the music, and the music has to come first. I'm sure I look fearfully funny doing morris; with legs the length of mine, I must look like a spider, or a giraffe, or something; and I'm always getting lost and making an ass of myself. I've seen Madam hurting herself dozens of times, and I know it was at me. We tried 'Haste to the Wedding' once, and I did counter-circles all the way through—

backwards, you know. She let out a perfect shriek at me, and then just rolled about. But do you suppose I cared? I was just loving the tune; and I got hold of the movement in time. Listening to the music's all very well, Miss Devine, but it's a long way second-best. You should come to the club with Biddy, and have a shot at it. There'll only be me there, and you wouldn't mind me. I believe you'd soon forget all about yourself and have as good a time as the rest of us. Now watch this! It will be a real country-dance this time. If it's either of those she told us to think about, I shall get lost unless somebody saves my life. I haven't exactly been thinking out the figures, have I?"

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

"Oh, sorry!" Jen had tried to make a ring, but had found the other seven unresponsive and even reproachful. "I always forget. And to-night I shall be worse than ever, for I'm thinking about her. Do please take care of me! I've forgotten all I ever knew. Yes, I want to make her dance. I don't know why, but I feel it would be good for her. She needs shaking up. She's too scared at present. I think she thinks she's too old, and that's silly."

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

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

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

"Are you old married ladies doing anything to-morrow night?" Jen cried, across the dressing-room. "For Joy and I are going to spend the evening with the Pixie. She's got some new idea, and she's going to tell us all about it. Couldn't you all come, too, and descend on her in a large and noisy crowd? She'd love it!"

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

"I'll have to ask Jack," Joan said doubtfully. "I'd love it, of course. If he can come, or if he has anything else to do and doesn't need me, I'll come like a shot."

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

The married girls and the rest of the class laughed.

"Oh, it's not so bad!" Joan said placidly. "There are compensations, 'Travellers' Joy.' You get lots of things done for you! Men are useful at times."

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

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

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

"Yes. Do you really think it's worth while?" Joy asked solemnly. "I say it must be such a nuisance having a man round all the time."

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

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

“Dear, dear!” Madam laughed. “If you meet my husband downstairs, tell him I’m just coming!”

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

“I suppose there is something in it!” she admitted then, as she sprang into her seat. “They all look tremendously happy, and all that. But it is funny; especially for Madam and the President! Joan always was more the kind.”

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

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

Mary flushed. “I haven’t any plans. Biddy often does go out,” she confessed.

“If I came round in our car, about four, would Biddy and you come out with me for the evening, without knowing where you were going? It would be to something really very nice,” Jen coaxed. “Would you trust me not to kidnap you?”

Mary turned to her with startled eyes. “Of course I’d go! You’re more than kind!”

“Well, you be ready; and Biddy must put on her party-est frock; and you, too, of course. That’s all I’m going to tell you. I want to whisk you both away to a party. If Biddy asks where the party is, tell her in fairyland, and we’re invited by a pixie. Oh, I don’t mean myself! I’m the giantess who’s going to take you there in her chariot. The M.C. of the party is the fairy person. Honestly, without joking, you’ll be interested, and Biddy will love it. Now this is your door. Good-night! So glad you could come!”

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

CHAPTER VIII

THE FRIGHT OF HER LIFE

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

"If she is, she won't sleep to-night, after the feast she's had! She'll have frightful indigestion—musical indigestion, of course! Are you going to make her dance?"

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

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

"Oh, Joy! Would you? Oh, that would be tophole!" Jen cried eagerly. "But your hostel isn't ready yet!"

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

"That would be gorgeous! I'm sure she'd love it!" Jen said happily. "It must be ripping to be twenty-one, and able to do things like that for people!"

"Don't be an idiot! If I'm interested in these two it's through you. You found her out. I feel as if the Biddy child might be the careless sort of little wretch I was," Joy explained carefully. "Caring for nobody but herself, wandering about and leaving other people to do the work at home. I was hateful to Joan and auntie heaps of times. I feel as if your Mary-Dorothy might be having to put up with the same kind of thin time they had with me."

"I don't believe you were ever hateful," Jen said loyally.

"My dear kid, you didn't know me then, when we were really Abbey Girls. It was before your time. I was a little beast. Do you suppose your Mary-Dorothy could get off?"

"How do I know? I don't know the first thing about offices. But I think she'd have a good try, if you asked her. I wonder if Biddy's wild with excitement at the idea of another party to-morrow?"

"My dear infant, the girl won't be in till late!" Joy said scornfully. "A party like that will go on for hours! Mary-Dorothy will have fallen asleep over the fire before Biddy comes in. I hope she apologises for the way she went off, that's all."

"Poor Mary-Dorothy! I don't envy her her job, with a kid like that! I'm glad we gave her a jolly evening. She'll have something besides Biddy to think about while she's sitting up for her."

Joy was wrong, however. Mary, climbing the long stairs and expecting a cold and empty flat at the top and long hours of waiting and worrying, was startled to see a light under the door.

"Biddy? Burglars?" She hesitated, frightened and dismayed. Then she ran forward; uncertainty of this kind was better ended at once! She was not brave; if she stayed to think, she knew she would not dare to go in. And it might only be Biddy. But what could have happened to bring Biddy home so early?

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

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

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

"Biddy, are you there? Oh, Biddy, what's the matter?"

With one leap Biddy was upon her, her arms half choking her. "Mary! Oh, Mary! I thought you'd gone away and left me! Oh, Mary, say you never will! Say you never will! Or I'll always be frightened when I come in!"

"Gone away, you silly girl? How could I go away?" Then, realising from Biddy's heartbroken sobbing how great the strain of the fear had been, Mary spoke very gravely and gently. "Biddy, dear, I'd never do that. You need never be frightened. I couldn't do that. I don't know how you could think such a thing of me. No matter how much you hurt me, I'll never go away and leave you. I thought you trusted me, Biddy."

"I did! Oh, I did! That's why I went all to pieces when you weren't here," Biddy wailed. "I knew you'd be nice, even though I'd been such a pig, and I was coming to say I was sorry, and you weren't here. And I couldn't think where you could have gone, except that perhaps you wanted to get away from me because I'd been so horrible."

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

"It wasn't nice." Biddy sank exhausted in a chair by the table and sat with bent head. "Mary, it was horrid. They—they meant to be kind, and I—I thought I liked them. But they were different to-night. You wouldn't have let me go if you'd known, and I knew that quite well. I was uncomfortable all the time. They played games, and—and I hated it!" she whispered passionately. "I like games at parties! I used to at school. But this was different. They were rough and—and not nice!" She had no words in which to describe the circle in which she had found herself and the shock her innate refinement had suffered.

Mary could well believe the games had been "different" from the same games at a schoolgirl party. Inwardly full of thanksgiving that Biddy was after all sensitive to the difference, she only said quietly: "So you came home early? I'm very glad. I'm only sorry the house was empty. I'd have had things cosy and warm if I'd known. Have you had any supper? For I'm starving."

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

"Coffee!" Mary pinched her lips. "Oh, Biddy! And you'd borrowed it!"

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

"We'll sponge it, and see if that helps," Mary was looking very worried. "It's not a big stain, and at the side there it might be possible to cover it. But you'll have to tell Vivien. Biddy, there's only one thing to be done. You've spoiled her frock; you can't give it back to her damaged. You must ask her if you may keep it, and if you may give her the cost of it. She may be quite glad, as she won't want to wear a coloured frock; she can get a white one for the summer. And we must see what we can do to make this one fit for you to wear."

"But I haven't got the money!" Biddy faltered. "If I'd had any, I'd have gone to her at once. Can we do it, Mary?"

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

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

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

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

"I'm going to do all the rest! I've had some supper—just a little!—and you're starving. I'll see to everything, Mary, if you'll only rest and let me do things. And do, *do* tell me where you were when I came home!"

Mary gave in. "I'm tired!" she confessed. "I don't know why, for I've only been looking on. But it was very exciting. I'm tired all over. I think I must have been keeping time to the music unconsciously."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The people who are going to dance at the show?"

"I suppose so. The teacher to-night was the one who has promised to dance for her; but she didn't dance to-night; she only told them where they were wrong," and Mary laughed as she remembered some of the comments made by "the lady on the platform," as Joy had called her.

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

"Shall I tell you the last and best one first?" Mary did not protest at sight of the teapot, though she did not generally allow it at night. "Well, then, you've got to see Vivien in the morning and find out if you may buy the frock, and you've got to do anything you can to improve the look of it, because—don't drop the teapot! Put it down before I tell you!——"

"Oh, *go on*, Mary dear!" Biddy begged, in an agony of impatience; but she put the pot down safely.

"Because Miss Robins is coming to-morrow at four, to take us somewhere for the evening. She wouldn't say where it was, but she said it was a party, and you'd love it."

"Oh, cheers! Topping! Oh, isn't she a brick?" and Biddy danced wildly round the table. "I do think she's a sport! But why, Mary? I mean, why has she taken such a fancy to you?"

"I can't imagine," Mary said truthfully. "I can't understand it at all. But she has been wonderfully nice to me. She kept coming and talking to me, and telling me who people were, and talking about the dances. She's more than kind."

"But what sort of a party is it, Mary? Will our kind of frocks do?" Biddy's joyful face clouded. "We haven't nice enough things to go among people like that!"

"So far as I've seen them, they weren't the kind of people who dress up at all," Mary said thoughtfully. "Our frocks will have to do, Biddy. She wouldn't tell me anything about the party; not anything that helped. She talked about pixies and fairyland, that was all."

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

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

Biddy's face lit up. "Would they let me? Won't it be only for girls who go to that church, or something?"

"Miss Robins didn't seem to think so. She spoke about you, and seemed to think it would be quite possible, if you would like it."

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

"Everybody. They looked very nice, and very comfortable."

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

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

"I will! Oh, I will! And she'll be glad. She said she wished she hadn't bought it."

"Then bring it here, and we'll see what we can do," Mary said quietly.

She had been sponging the frock carefully for some time, when Biddy, watching her with a very sober face, said suddenly: "Mary, you're rather a dear, you know."

Mary flushed. "Because I'm trying to help you? But I would be horrid if I didn't."

"No, I knew you'd help. But you haven't said a word about how horrid I was. Mary, I haven't said I'm sorry. I am sorry, Mary! I'm awfully sorry. I was a pig to you this evening, and you're always nice. Did you cry when I'd gone?"

“Now you’re asking too many questions!” Mary said shakily. “Don’t go back to it, Biddy. It did hurt badly. I’m glad you’re sorry. It was nice of you to tell me. But don’t do it again! Or sometime you may come in and find me gone, now that you’ve put the idea into my head!—Oh, I don’t mean it, you silly girl! Did you really have such a fright?”

“It was awful!” Biddy said brokenly. “I thought I was all alone. I’ll never feel safe again! But you promised, Mary!”

“Of course I promised. I want you as much as you want me. But we mustn’t go hurting one another, Biddy dear. It’s not as if either of us had any one else to run to. We ought to stand by one another. Don’t you think so?”

“I’ll never go anywhere you don’t like again!” Biddy said penitently. “I didn’t like it when I got there. And I kept thinking of you, Mary. I wish—I wish you’d come with me sometimes, when I want to go to places! It’s not nice always going alone.”

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

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

CHAPTER IX

"A LARGE AND NOISY CROWD."

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

Biddy, to her intense joy, was sitting beside Frost, the chauffeur; Mary and Jen were behind. Jen's first quick glance had shown her several things;—that Biddy was in a state of wild though suppressed excitement;—that she was very pretty, with dark brown curly hair tied back with a wide ribbon, and cheeks that needed no artificial colour to brighten them;—that she wore something pink and frilly, and that Mary's dress under her big coat was grey. "She would wear grey, of course!" said Jen to herself. "Something quiet; so that no one will notice her! It would never occur to her that a grey frock would make her feel older and soberer than ever! It's the last thing she ought to wear. I'd like to see her in blue!"

"I can't think of any confession you can have to make to me," Mary, all unconsciously, looked at Jen with a touch of adoring admiration; there was no other word for it; it just expressed her feeling for this radiant happy girl who had come so suddenly into her life and insisted so strenuously on staying there.

"Oh, but that's because you haven't begun to sound the depths of my cheekiness yet. It would never occur to you. Do you know what I call you; when you're not here, I mean?"

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

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

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

"Like the office!" Jen agreed. "Right-o! If you're going to join my club I'll want to be jolly and friendly. Biddy!" She poked the front passenger in the back. "Would you like to know where you and Mary-Dorothy are going?"

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

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

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

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

"Go on!" Jen said encouragingly. "'You *are* funny! Positively weird!' That's what you want to say, isn't it? I don't mind; but you'll have to get used to me. Only children are invited, so please both grow downwards as quickly as you can. I'm about seven myself. Mary-Dorothy, you shall be very old; I'll allow you to be eleven. Biddy, what are you?"

"Five!" Biddy said promptly. "What are we going to do? Play 'Mulberry Bush' and 'Looby Light'?"

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

Mary and Biddy looked their astonishment. "Help! Where is it to be?" Biddy cried. "In the Albert Hall?"

"In the East End, in Plaistow. The children have been asked through their school teachers, and the teachers have been going all winter to country-dance classes taught by a friend of mine. She thought of this party and planned the whole thing; she's great at running parties! The children—which includes us, I hope—are going to dance, in a big, beautiful hall; it's a swimming pool really, but there's a dancing floor put down for the winter. We're going to have tea with the M.C. first; we call her the Pixie! She's *this* high! But she manages everybody; you should see her bully a class! We were all in her class last summer, and we loved her. Joy's coming, of course. She couldn't resist it when she heard about the party, so she wired home that she'd stop another night. But she's gone round in her own car to pick up Joan and Cicely. Joan's husband says he'll spare her, for once; and Cicely's friends couldn't come to dinner, after all, so the President immediately rang me up to say she'd come too. If the men come, they'll have to look on; it's no use pretending either of them is a little elementary schoolgirl! But I guess *we* can all pretend well enough, if it means some dancing. You'll enjoy it, Miss—oh, sorry! I mean Mary-Dorothy! It ought to be a pretty sight."

"Can't I dance?" Biddy asked hungrily. "Which dances are they doing? I know a few."

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

"'Gathering Peascods'—'Ruffy Tufty'—'Goddesses'—'Butterfly'—I know all those," Biddy cried eagerly.

"Splendid! And 'We won't go Home' is very easy; and 'Galopede.' Nobody needs to learn those."

"Oh, cheers! I shall love it!" Biddy jumped in her seat with joyful anticipation.

Mary said nothing, but her eyes were eager. Jen's were determined, but she said nothing either. She had made up her mind, however, that Biddy was not the only outsider who would dance that night.

As they raced eastward, Jen told a little about the Pixie, and her work among the troops in the war; and Mary listened enthralled, while Biddy hung over the back of her seat lest she should miss a word. "She says it feels now as if it had been in another life. She also says it's forgotten, with all the rest of the war. But I don't believe that. It's no more forgotten than the war is among the people who went through it. Work like that isn't forgotten."

"Will she mind our coming?" Mary asked nervously. "She hadn't asked us. You're all old friends; it's different."

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

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

"She said, 'Of course! Bring them along! The more the merrier!' But she didn't know there was a chance of Joan and Cicely and their old men, as Joy always calls them, turning up, too. That's to be a surprise," Jen said, laughing.

"We're early. The others were to meet us here at five," she said, as the car drew up before a huge white palace of a building, after what seemed an endless journey through busy streets. "But we won't wait for them. Look!" She pointed to a marble tablet as they went up the steps. "It's a war memorial. Isn't it a jolly one?—Oh, there's Eirene!" at indignant hooting from outside. "Eirene is Joy's car, though she's anything but peaceful! They've found us out; that's why she's coughing so angrily. Then we'd better wait."

The “large and noisy crowd” came hurrying up the steps to remonstrate, Joy wrathfully accusing Jen of racing her on purpose. Avice Everett, Cicely and Joan were with her, but without the husbands. “We left them to console one another,” Joan explained with a laugh.

“You look *much* more married than you did last night in your gymmy,” Jen informed her.

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

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

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

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

“Of course you couldn’t! It’s going to be great fun. But it’s only for the children; you’ll have to sit on the platform.—Oh, well! We’ll see!” relenting at sight of their faces. “Don’t you think you could bear it?”

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

“I’m so glad to see you that I suppose I shall give in,” the Pixie confessed. “But it’s supposed to be only for the children. We’ll let *you* dance!” to Biddy, who was keeping close to Mary, but watching everybody eagerly, overjoyed to see all those she had heard about the night before. “You’re the one Jen calls the burglar-girl, aren’t you?” to Avice. “Then you must be the one who’s called after a dance!” to Mary.

Mary laughed and coloured, as Cicely and Joan and Avice all looked at her curiously. “I’m Mary Dorothy Devine,” she said. “But I doubt if the dance had much to do with it. I always understood it was my two grandmothers I was called for.”

“Oh, I think you’re called after the dance! Come along and have tea, everybody! Isn’t it jolly to have such a big party? I love a crowd!” and she bustled ahead of them to secure two tables, and to call for “Tea for eight and lots and lots of cakes,” to one of the friendly waiting girls in brown.

“Now tell me all about it!” she demanded, when all had found seats.

“All about what?” Joan asked innocently.

“Why, being married! What is it like? Is it a great success? What kind of honeymoons have you had? Are you going to settle down at home now? What fun! And what have you done with your husbands? Got tired of them?” and her eyes twinkled at the happy brides, who so obviously enjoyed being teased.

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

“Just like Joy, wasn’t it?” she would cry across the table to Mary; or “What a joke! Don’t you wish you’d been there?”

And Mary would laugh and nod and agree whole-heartedly. It did not occur to her that the Pixie was watching her and summing her up all the time, while she chattered and laughed with the older friends; or asked Joy earnestly how her children at home were getting on.

“What’s the new stunt, Pixie?” Jen demanded. “You said you had something to tell us.”

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

“I’m working in a shop,” she announced gleefully.

“A—what?” gasped Jen.

“You’re *not*!” cried Joy indignantly.

“Pixie, you’re being untruthful! What exactly do you mean?” the President demanded.

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

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

“To earn my living,” she explained calmly.

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

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

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

“We make lovely handwoven materials, for frocks and curtains and things; you’d better come to us if you’re going to furnish!” to the newly-married ones. “Such beautiful colourings! It’s a joy to work among them. I don’t know very much about blending colours yet, but I’m learning, and I’m happy all day long with such gorgeous things all round me.”

“Oh, but you’d be happy anywhere!” Jen interpolated.

“Oh, no, I shouldn’t! Not if there were things that jarred on me. But these lovely soft colours are restful and satisfy me; they’re what I’ve been wanting.”

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

“Oh, no! The girls do the weaving. I’ve never learned that. No, I make up frocks for customers. I’m happy all day long, designing beautiful things—for they *are* beautiful!—and working with such lovely materials. I’d love to design a frock for you!” to Joan. “I believe we have the very thing to set off your hair and eyes. Oh, I *would* like to make a frock for you!” and she eyed Joan hungrily.

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

“*Good!* If she doesn’t snap it up, you shall have it! We have other things, besides the handwoven goods; rugs and carpets straight from the desert! The shop is full of sand when we’ve been unpacking. You must all come and see me, and see the looms, and the weavers at work. But we’re forgetting the party. What’s the time? Gracious! They’ll all be waiting for us! It’s going to be great fun, you know. We shall get in fearful muddles and lose our sets, and the floor’s slippery and we shall all fall down. But never mind. It’s going to be tremendous fun! Come up to my room and change your shoes,” and she hustled them all away.

CHAPTER X

THE PIXIE'S PARTY

"How did you settle the frock difficulty?" Jen asked in an undertone of Mary-Dorothy, as Biddy, at the other side of the room, took off her big coat. "That's the one she borrowed, I suppose? It's very pretty! But I didn't think you'd let her wear it again."

Mary laughed. "Poor kid! She spilt coffee on it, Miss Robins; or somebody spilt it on her! So she had to ask her friend if she might buy it from her; Vivien is wearing mourning for her father, so was rather glad to get rid of the pink frock. We've washed the stain, and it isn't so very bad. Biddy's forgotten all about it. Of course," she added quickly, "it means no other summer frock for her. You mustn't think we can really afford to do that kind of thing. But there was no choice. She'd spoiled the other girl's frock."

"Poor kiddie! How upset she would be! Did she enjoy the party?"

"No," Mary said quietly. "She came home early, very unhappy. I can't say I was sorry. But I was sorry for her, and very glad I had your invitation to cheer her up. She danced for joy! And she seemed glad we were to come together. I think her party had been a bit rough, and she had felt uneasy and out of it."

"She'd wanted you," Jen commented. "It's what I said last night; you ought to go about with her. You couldn't while she was with that crowd; I quite see that. But if she's coming to my class and taking up folk-dancing, I do hope you'll come, too."

"You'll be making the mistake of your life if you don't," she added mentally, but did not like to say it aloud.

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

"Why, of *course* you must dance! I'll find you partners! I'm afraid there won't be any boys here, though," and the Pixie's eyes twinkled with mischief. "You shall come to a members' party next time, and I'll find you lots of boys to dance with, such dears! But there won't be any here to-night; you'll have to dance with one another," and she hurried away to speak to a girl who had come to look for her.

Biddy looked at Mary guiltily; she knew Mary's opinion of her boy friends at the college. At the moment she had had enough of them; they had seemed "different somehow" at the party the night before.

But there was no more time to spare. The Pixie, with a hurried word to the girl, "Are they here?" turned to her guests. "Come along! We must go down. We've been arriving since five, and we'll be all over the place. We're fearfully excited over our party, you know, and if we aren't kept busy, we shall get rushing about and losing our heads. Come on down! It's going to be a frightful muddle!"

"I love the way she's turned us all into children for the occasion," Mary said to Jen, as they followed down the long stone staircase. "It's always 'we!' She's thinking even of herself from the children's point of view."

"Now you're going to see me being really official," their hostess announced impressively. "I shall be all over the place, too. You'd better keep out of the way, and you must dance together. We all know our places, and just where we're to dance. If there are any gaps, we'll

put some of you in; if not, you can make a set in a corner, and I'll send the odds and ends to you to make up. There are sure to be some of us without partners."

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

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

The big swimming-bath was transformed into a dancing hall. Parents and friends hung over the balcony railing; and Jen was reminded of her first sight of country-dancing, six years ago, when she, a very new girl, had hung over the railing to watch Joan crowned as May Queen by Joy, when Joy had abdicated after her year's reign.

Small girls in frocks of every rainbow colour filled the hall. Where the frocks, and big hair-ribbons, and white stockings, and coloured shoes, had come from it was difficult to imagine, for the children were from poor schools in East Ham and Canning Town and Barking. Already they were fairly jumping with excitement, racing about wildly to find friends or call greetings to mothers up aloft; new groups kept arriving to swell the crowd. The Pixie, a vivid green spot, seemed in every corner at once, like a very active fairy in a world of brilliant butterflies.

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

"Eight times through!" announced the Pixie, appearing suddenly on the platform, and piano and violin struck up the tune.

"How do you do it?" Cicely asked teasingly. "I believe you're wafted about by wireless! You were away over there a second ago!"

"She leaps up into the air and floats. Thistledown does, you know," Jen said dreamily, gazing enthralled as the long lines of children fell back and crossed, swung their partners, and broke into excited clapping to cheer the top couple down the middle to the bottom of the set.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They dance all over, not just with their feet," Mary ventured.

"You're supposed to. But it's true. They're full of life. They dance harder than we do at classes, Pixie!"

"Your real East-End dances harder—and almost better—than any one else. It's curious, but it's true. It's in them. They dance beautifully."

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

"We don't want to rest," she chuckled. "We lose no time at our parties! Play the first phrase!" to the pianist. "Now! Do we all know it?" and she addressed the eager children. "Very well! Make your squares for four. Now! All those facing me run away to *that* wall! All with their backs to me run this way. Got it? You ready down there?" to the visitors in the corner. "We'll have it twice through. Now go!"

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

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

"Did you ever see anything happier than this hall full of children?" Joan came up after the dance to sit with them, while the children dropped on the floor to rest, or made for the seats at the side.

"Yes, one thing," said Jen. "And that's the person who planned it. I really think she's the happiest of the lot. She keeps bursting into little chuckles of joy, just at the faces of the kiddies. Oh, it's all right, Mary-Dorothy! She's at the other end of the hall."

"She was here a second ago," Mary said helplessly.

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

"It's like a flight of coloured pigeons, or seagulls!" Jen turned rapturously to the Pixie, who had appeared again in their midst, as mysteriously as usual.

"It's wonderful! We expected such a muddle. And there's nothing to do. They're M.C.-ing themselves. They know where to go, and nobody gets lost, and there's no fuss or trouble. It's beautiful. I've been so worried—oh, *look* at that! Isn't it pretty?" as the throng broke up into circling rings of ten or twelve. "Now watch! Look out!" to Mary. "There! Isn't it wonderful?" as all the little arms went up. "And we clap right on the beat; it's very good. *How* they love it!"

"This is the prettiest yet," Mary ventured.

"Of course, we do get lost now and then!" the Pixie chuckled, as a small girl right under her nose found herself left out of a ring and ran round wildly, trying to force her way into her place. "No! We won't let her in now; it can't be done. We should all fall over if we let go now. But we're very little! Some of us are only infants! *I* think we all dance beautifully!"

"We're having the time of our lives, anyway," Jen said, laughing.

"I'm going to dance, too. They don't need any looking after. I'll find some one who doesn't know the next one, and haul her through it."

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

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

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

“Now, Mary-Dorothy, you’re going to dance this! Oh, yes, you’ve simply got to come. I want to dance; I can’t stand it any longer. You’re coming in with me. I’ll tell you what to do; it’s perfectly easy. Come on—run! Or we’ll be left out.”

“But I can’t. I’ve never danced,” Mary gasped. “And”—wildly—“Miss Everett wants you to dance with her!”

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

Smothering a laugh again at the dazed face opposite her, Jen gave hasty directions, which Mary did not begin to grasp. “We’re Twos; we’re going to work up the line towards the platform, and then down again as Ones. Give your right hand across in a star, with the next couple; that’s right! Now we run eight steps, and turn and come back left hands. What could be easier than that? Then the arches; I’ll take care of you, and you’ll know it by the second time. Then we swing; hang on to me, and I’ll guide you; I’m the man, by the way—you’re a woman! Run these arches; four steps up and four down, and all over again. Now skip! Skip hard! And lean well back and pull against me; straight arms!”

Gasping with amazement, Mary found herself dancing; found herself instinctively keeping time to the music; found herself enjoying this new thing as she had enjoyed nothing for years. The movements, simple as they were, demanded all her thought; she was desperately determined not to spoil Jen’s dance by being clumsy and forgetful; awkward and stiff she felt, indeed, but fortunately without the faintest idea how awkward she seemed to her partner.

At the moment she could think only of what she must do next; of running or skipping; right hand or left. For a wild agonised second she did not know how to skip; then it came to her suddenly. She was not sure if she had ever skipped in her life before, but she had watched children, and she found her feet discovering what to do. Any thought at all beyond her feet and hands was given to the astounding incredible fact that she, Mary Devine, was dancing; had danced “up the line,” and was beginning to go down again. Then, to her horror, she discovered that nearly everything she had learned with such difficulty must be reversed; over first instead of under, and the swing in the opposite direction. Jen laughed at her dismay, and gently kept her right.

In the face of such crises as these, Mary had no time to think of herself, of how she looked, of what other people thought. Certainly nobody seemed to mind her mistakes or to be thinking of her at all. And other things which were new to her passed unnoticed at the time, so far as her conscious mind was concerned; but came back to her afterwards; the very tune to which they had danced, though she had listened and responded to every note; the gentleness and ease of tall Jen’s every movement, with never a jerk or jar. Mary remembered and marvelled at it afterwards, though she did not know she had noticed it at the time.

She did not understand the gratified twinkle in the Pixie’s eyes, as they met her in a star and did arches together; she only saw kindly encouragement and no hint of amusement.

“How nice of you to dance at my party, Miss Devine! Jenny-Wren, it’s not fair of you to be so big! How can you expect *us* to make an arch over *you*?” and the small girl who was her proud partner giggled and ran down the line outside Jen instead of making the arch.

"It's easier that way, certainly!" Jen laughed. "It's a lovely party, Pixie! We're all so glad we came!"

Nor did Mary see Biddy's astounded face or hear her incredulous cry, "Mary! She's dancing! Oh, hold me up! I'm going to faint!"

"Swing and change!" Joy said ruthlessly. "And look here, Miss Biddy Devine! There's no reason on earth why your Mary shouldn't dance, and it will do her all the good in the world. She'll get younger every day. You've allowed her to think she's old, because she's older than you, and it's rather beastly of you. Goodness me! She's only a year or two older than I am!"—which was understating the case, but Biddy was not in a position to argue it, though she frankly did not believe it. "D'you want to be allowed to join Jen Robins's club, and learn piles of new dances, and perhaps morris and sword too?" Joy asked severely.

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

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

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

"She'd be funny if she didn't like it. And for a beginner she's not so bad; might be a lot worse, anyway!"

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

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

"Oh, that's practice! You shall watch 'Winifred's Knot' and 'The Black Nag.' They're very easy, but they have introductions and things, and you have to set and side. But you can do 'We won't go Home till Morning;' it's no harder than 'Butterfly.' You'll learn the others at my class!"

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

It was after the next dance that some small person, sitting on the shiny floor to rest, discovered that by lifting up her feet and giving herself a push with her hands, she could spin round and round like a top. The fashion spread like measles, and in every corner little rings of small girls sat twirling happily, ignoring agitated parents, who could not forget the certain results to white underclothes.

"Oh, look! *Look* at them!" the Pixie was almost helpless with laughter. "And Mother's up in the gallery telling them not to! They won't listen, of course! Look, they're all doing it! It's as good as the dancing! Oh, aren't they simply priceless?"

And the visitors on the platform laughed loud and long at the sight.

"I vote we try it, too!" Jen giggled.

"You! You'd look like 'Alice' in the long-drawn-out stage! You'd sweep the floor!" Joy said cruelly.

"In private, if you like, Jenny-Wren!" the President laughed. "And what about tunics?"

"We'd better have another dance. It isn't fair; Mother will be coming down to interfere in a moment! She's thinking of the washing!" the Pixie chuckled. "Play 'We won't go Home!' There! See them leap into their places! They know their spots and stick to them!"

“Come on, Mary-Dorothy!” said Jen. “You’ll be stiff to-morrow, anyway, so you may as well be a little stiffer! It’s worth it. I want to lead you down the middle and skip you up again!”

“You shall watch ‘Sellenger’s Round!’ ” Jen said, at the end, “because I want to watch, too. It’s very special!”

“What *I* want is to see the Pixie arrange the rings!” said Joy, and made for the platform again to see the fun.

The inner ring of four couples of infants in white, and the second ring outside them, were easily formed; but the next was more difficult, and when it came to the last two, Cicely said sympathetically, “I wonder if we could help! She’s so tiny for the job! It’s too bad to leave it all to a scrap like her!”

“Oh, but *what* a scrap, President!” Joan laughed. “She’s tiny, but she’s all energy! Talk about specks of radium!”

“She’ll do it,” Joy said confidently, “and then she’ll be ever so pleased with herself. We’d better not go butting in. She knows how she’s going to manage it.”

“Yes, but she’s such a dot!” Jen murmured. “She can’t see to the other end of her line! I think I’ll go and offer to let her run up on to my shoulders!”

The Pixie, an animated vivid green spot, was running round outside her ring, leading a string of thirty small girls hand in hand.

“Who’s the other end of us?” she asked wildly, again and again, as she tried to get the line joined up. Then, meeting another stray section of a ring,—“Are you a line, too? Where’s the other end of you? Oh, *goodness*! Here, join up quickly!” and she hooked the lines together and darted away to find the other loose ends.

“She’s done it! Cheers for the Little One!” cried Joy. “And jolly quickly, too!”

“I believe she ran about under their feet!” Jen announced seriously. “She’s going in herself. She ought to be the Maypole in the middle; but no one would be able to see her except the infants in the first ring! There! Mary-Dorothy, don’t you love that?” as all the rings swung round and back, and then, dropping hands, surged to the centre and out again.

“Oh, it’s beautiful! Wonderful! And such a wonderful tune!” Mary cried softly.

“I’ll tell you what it all means on the way home. Watch all the bare little arms go up! Isn’t that a fine sight? I hope they’ll do it again!”

“Pixie, that was great!” the President said fervently, when three cheers had been given, and the hall was a mass of tired, excited children getting into coats and shoes.

“Why didn’t you come to watch ‘Sellenger?’ It was lovely!” Jen assured her warmly. “Mary-Dorothy was quite stunned!”

“Was it all right? Was there any shape in it?” the Pixie asked anxiously. “Oh, ‘Sellenger’ is worth it every time! Oh, hasn’t it been a nice party?” she sighed happily. “I have enjoyed myself! Have you enjoyed yourself?” turning swiftly to Mary. “But I know you have; I saw your face. I am so glad you came!”

CHAPTER XI

MARY-DOROTHY'S WAY

On Sunday evening Mary, with a determined face, sat down to write letters. Biddy was out with Vivien; it was a friendship of which Mary heartily approved, realising Biddy's imperative need of companions of her own age; Vivien was far less silly than Doris and her crowd, so Mary's mind was at ease about her sister.

Mary was more tired than she thought she had ever been in her life before, and was very stiff with the unusual exercise; and she strongly suspected she would be stiffer still to-morrow. But not for any amount of physical weariness would she have been without the experience of that evening at Plaistow. Unconsciously she felt richer for the memory; for the sight of the children's happy faces; for the meeting with the Pixie, whose vivid personality had interested her intensely; most of all, for the thought that she herself had danced and had not found it impossible.

As she watched the classes on Friday night, she had thought wistfully that years ago she could have enjoyed this as much as Biddy would now, and had wondered regretfully why it had not come her way in time. Then had come that Writing Person's startling suggestion that she should try; she had not seemed to think it impossible to anybody. And Mary had tried, under the stress of Jen's insistence; and it had been not only possible but a great delight.

She sat with her pen and paper before her, and wondered. It was not a question of age; she realised that though she was a good deal older than these girls who danced, yet it was absurd to talk of thirty as elderly—as if it had been fifty or sixty. She did not feel too old; that was not where the difficulty lay. It was rather that she had never in her life done anything of the kind; there had been no opportunity for it since she had left school. She had lived in town, and the temptations to exercise had been very few. She had given up tennis and cycling, of necessity; her gym days were almost forgotten; walking in town was not attractive. She must be stiff and set in every muscle; she smiled rather wistfully as she thought of the dancing children, of the supple, trained bodies of the students in the evening class, of the easy, perfect movement she had noticed in Jen Robins at their first meeting; how well she understood it now! Anything like that was obviously out of the question for herself, though she might still be proud of Biddy as a dancer.

But was it all impossible to her? Could she not enjoy it as much as they did—or more, because it would all be so very new—even though she could never hope to dance with their ease, though it was sure to be always an effort to her? What was it that Writing Person had said? That she had never done anything of the kind until three years ago. It had been all new to her, too; and yet she had not seemed afraid to attempt even advanced morris. Mary wished she could see her again and ask a few questions. If it should be possible, if she could learn to dance with Biddy, life would be a new and very much more interesting thing. That much she had learned from those few moments when Jen Robins gripped both her hands and bade her “Skip! Skip hard! Lean well back and pull against me!”

Dreamily Mary went over the happy evening again; the peep into the restaurant, where scores of hungry, happy children sat at long tables drinking lemonade and eating buns, all reluctant to leave this palace of delight and go to their homes; the Pixie's hearty “Good-bye! you must come again. I'll love it if you will”; and to Mary herself, “I'm so glad you danced at

my party! Now you must go on dancing. You'll love it!" Then had come the run home with Bidy in Jen's car; and Jen, by request, had produced the morris pipe and played "Butterfly" and "We won't go Home" and "Rufty Tufty," just to make sure they had not forgotten the tunes. They were half forgotten now, but kept coming back in snatches, unfinished sentences of music, half-phrases and cadences; till Mary felt she would go crazy if she did not get hold of the music soon and see how the whole tunes went. Would it be possible to borrow it for a night or two from Jen? And if she got a penny whistle, would she be able to pick them out? She doubted it, but Jen had said it was quite easy; and Bidy had announced her intention of having a tin whistle first thing on Monday morning; the price of the wooden pipe had astonished them and put that quite out of the question.

Mary wondered, and sighed wistfully again; and at last began to write. These letters had been waiting for months, hanging over her, put aside because at night she was always too tired to face so big a task. Those aunts in South Africa, and the cousins in Australia, expected such long letters, giving all the family history; and there was so little to tell, except trivial everyday happenings at the office! These were the only relations she and Bidy had, and she knew it was her duty to keep in touch with them, and that her mother would have wished her to do it. But she had never seen the good people; the letters were merely duty letters, and she always put off the task as long as possible. It was shamefully long since she had written, and the thought of the apologies with which she must begin had helped to keep her from starting. It was so easy to be discouraged; so much easier to put it off a little longer, and sit and dream before the fire instead!

What strange impulse had moved her to write to-night, she could not have explained; but it had been irresistible. If she had been told it was closely connected with those two dances the night before, and with the stimulus and excitement of the music and the dancing children, she would not have believed it. If any one had declared it was the same impulse which had moved Jen Robins to say she wanted to begin teaching her class at once, Mary would only have been puzzled and incredulous. But the fact remained that to-night she felt she must do something worth while, and those waiting letters claimed her first attention.

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

It proved to be a long letter. In telling the whole story, from the first appearance of Jen in the office, Mary lived it all over again and enjoyed it anew. A writer by instinct, she had great descriptive powers and revelled in their use; but her first attempt at story-writing, many years ago, had been a failure; and, discouraged and without confidence in herself, she had let her gift lie undeveloped. To-night, under the stimulus of the music and the unusual exercise, she wrote and described events and people with real enjoyment, and told her story well. She was tired out at the end, but had a satisfied feeling very new to her. For once, she had done good work and had not wasted her time; very often she knew in her heart she had been nothing but a slacker.

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

These dreams were part of her life. For years she had lived in them, unknown to her mother, unsuspected by Biddy, whose matter-of-fact temperament would have asked, in astounded bewilderment, "What's the good of it?" The good of it, to Mary, was the unfailing way of escape she thus had from anything troublesome or difficult, any worrying problem. The unreal romance was real to her; she knew every one in that story-world intimately, and was happier with these dream heroes and heroines than with any visible friends. She did not, indeed, greatly desire real friends while she had these; real people would argue and have their own opinions; with these others she did as she liked—or rather, she let them do as they liked and was content to follow placidly where they led, always exploring new situations, new problems in their company. That there was a real and great danger to herself, and a serious wrong to Biddy, in this curious absorption of hers in an unseen world—that this contentment with things as they were, and this lack of all desire for outside friends, were unnatural and wrong and dangerous—Mary dimly suspected; but characteristically refused to face the thought.

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

"I suppose it isn't right! But it does no harm to anybody. Why do I feel bad about it every now and then? No, it's all the time; but I keep the feeling down. But it's there at the back of my mind; it isn't right to go on like this. It can't be, though I don't know why. Of course, I could never get out of it now. I've tried often enough, and I always slide back again. But it isn't natural; other people don't do it. So it can't be quite right. Why am I thinking about it to-night? I've gone over it all so often."

She sat gazing into the fire. "It's through meeting all these new people," she said aloud at last. "None of them would do it. They're all so—so healthy and normal! I wonder if they'd even understand? I suppose not; they'd think me crazy. And the dancing is so healthy and good; and the music is so simple and natural. It's all so—so different! So real! And"—unwillingly enough—"I suppose all this that haunts me is unreal, and—and unhealthy—and unnatural, if it's the very opposite! And yet it's comforting, and keeps me very happy! I wonder—it's very queer——! Oh, well!" she said restlessly at last. "It may be all wrong, but I could never be any different now! I've no fight left in me; I've been beaten too often! I suppose I'm a fearful coward; and awfully soft. But I had to have something, all these years! If Jen Robins had come along ten years ago——! But she was about eight then. She might have saved me, if she'd given me this dancing and the music then. It's too late now!"

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

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

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

"I say, what a ripping letter!" Biddy looked up in frank delight. "The old folks will simply love it, Mary-Dorothy! Do you mind if I call you that sometimes? It's jollier than just Mary. Mary's so ordinary. But Mary-Dorothy is all your own. May I?"

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

"You've told it awfully well," Biddy said warmly. "I can just see the hall, and the kiddies, and the green tiny Pixie! I say, old thing, you ought to write books, you know! I've always said so. Well, stories or articles, then!" as Mary shook her head and coloured, and began to cut bread vigorously. "You do know how to describe things! Why don't you have a shot at it? I believe the papers would print an article telling all about those children last night, if you described the whole thing as well as you've done in that letter! And you might get a guinea for it! Think of it, Mary Devine! A guinea!"

Mary laughed. "Biddy, don't be silly! My writing's no good."

"I think it's topping!"

"I'm afraid you're no judge. Come to supper, and don't be silly!"

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

"It certainly wouldn't," Mary agreed, her cheeks flushed. "But there's a lot of 'if' about it, Biddy dear."

CHAPTER XII

DANCING FOR JENNY-WREN

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

Biddy was busy, in the intervals of the dances, making friends with girls in the audience. She was always popular and made friends easily; these girls and she had a common interest in their delight in the demonstration; she made the most of the chance, and was on friendly terms with several before the evening was over, and was assured of a welcome to the club.

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

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

"Madam borrowed them for us. Just for to-night," Jen added. "It's so much jollier to dress alike; but we couldn't have special frocks just for one evening. So we're swanking fearfully, and pretending we're real Staff people! She had to hunt for a while to get one long enough for me! Joy says she's tickled to death to see herself in a blue frock at last; and the President says she'll never get over the honour of it. It does look jolly, doesn't it?"

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

She was grateful, too, for the experience of those two dances at the Pixie's party. Slight as it had been, she understood more than if she had never danced at all. It would be worth learning the dances just for that reason, if every new step she took would mean fuller understanding and enjoyment next time she looked on.

But the biggest revelation was when Madam, after a few words of introduction and explanation of the first dances, stood up to dance a morris jig. She wore a blue frock, too, just like those of the girls, but there was something indefinable that marked her out among them all. Mary watched the smooth perfection of her movement spellbound, wondering how she did it, and where the difference lay. At last, she realised, she was seeing the real thing, which even Jen and Joan and the rest were only trying to copy.

"She's as much beyond them as they are beyond me! I'm a lump beside them; as heavy as a— as a cow!—and as stiff as a rusty machine. But she has something not one of them has got. Their dancing is pretty; but this is beautiful," and she sat, chin on hand, gazing with rapt, wondering eyes.

There was no doubt about the desire for an encore; the blue-frocked girls clamoured for it more noisily than the more ignorant audience. Madam laughed, and went out to dance again;

and Mary settled down to another two minutes of intense concentrated joy.

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

“She’ll sing presently; she’s promised. You’ll love that too,” Jen sat down beside her. “I’m glad you’ve seen her. She’s rather perfect, isn’t she?”

“Are there any others who do it quite like that?”

“Oh, yes, quite a lot! But everybody’s dancing is different. Some think there’s no one quite like Madam, and we’re among them! But other people prefer other people’s—if you can understand that! It isn’t really possible to compare them. You ought to see a Staff demonstration, and judge for yourself.”

“Why aren’t you dancing in this?”

“Because it’s only for six; and they want Joy and me to dance a jig together presently. Of course, it will be awful, just after Madam, but she won’t let us off, and we’re fearfully meek and obedient; at least, we do what she wants! If you can’t bear it, you can shut your eyes. It will be all right about joining the club, Mary-Dorothy. I’ve arranged it. So I hope you’ll come with Biddy. You will, won’t you?”

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

“I know. Isn’t it maddening? I had to buy it all before I could be happy. But, of course, I’d learnt a lot of it at school. I could lend you some of it; I wouldn’t like you to go crazy! Now I must go and do my best. It’s ‘Jockie.’ Later on Avvy will dance ‘Molly Oxford.’ She’s very good, you know. And Madam’s going to do ‘Princess Royal.’ I’m afraid the girls will want to start with morris jigs; and it can’t be done!”

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

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

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

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

“Every bit you do helps you to understand more. Each dance you learn, and certainly each new morris tradition, is a sort of key, and unlocks another door. That’s partly why I’ve learned all those advanced morris dances; so that I’d understand them when I saw them done. You enjoy them far more. But it was partly that I couldn’t help it,” she admitted. “I know I can never do them as they should be done; but I can enjoy them tremendously, all the same. And I do love to feel I understand them. Besides, there’s the music; one wants to know the dance that belongs to each tune. They’ve grown together; you only get half if you don’t know the movements.”

“This was what I wanted to ask you!” Mary pleaded eagerly. “Miss Robins has asked me to come with my sister to her class. I’ve been thinking I couldn’t resist it. But could I try the

morris? I've never done anything of the kind; never! And—and you said you'd been the same. But you do it, even those difficult movements. I thought perhaps you'd advise me. Do you mind my asking?"

"I do them frightfully badly! No one knows it better than I do!" the Writing Person laughed. "But I get heaps out of it, all the same. I should try everything, if I were you. If it's too much you can always drop it. If you've even learned the step, you'll find it will be something; it will help you to understand. You'll get frightfully stiff at first, but that doesn't do any harm. Oh, I should try! I'd never done anything at all, as I told you; my work's all with books and pencils and typewriters! I was stunned when I found myself using morris sticks and swords; I nearly died when I found we were to learn a morris jig! But it was with joy as much as with fright. You may never be able to get the certificates, Miss Devine; I know nothing about that. I've never even tried for any of them myself. That's funking it, isn't it? Or perhaps it's merely common sense. But I do think you need to be very fit and strong, and trained in gym work, to get them. But you can have quite as much fun out of it as the certificate people. I sometimes think I get more. To so many of them it's just an extra teaching stunt, and an extra certificate that will be valuable; and people like Madam—and others I could name!—are merely useful because they can help them to pass the exams. I get heaps more out of the classes than that! Bother certificates! The dancing's beautiful, and the music's wonderful, and the people who teach and dance to us are thrillingly interesting personalities, some of them. I love them, and I love the dances, and I love the music; and isn't that enough? But I'm one of the worst dancers they have; and how they put up with me I don't know. I often wonder! They're all very nice about it. It's a tremendous help to one's work, too, you know," she added. "If you do any work that needs imagination, all this helps intensely."

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

"Every single time. I always want to go home and plunge into work. I'm too tired out at the time, but about two days afterwards I always have an outburst of energy, and all kinds of new ideas! Really, I consider folk-dancing responsible for most of the work I've done in the last two years," she said laughing. "It's a most valuable stimulant! And such a healthy one! I'm better in every way. But I must go and thank Miss Robins for letting me come to watch; I'm afraid I begged for an invitation! I'd go anywhere to see Madam dance and to hear those songs. And I wanted to watch all that crowd dance, too; I love the whole lot of them!"

"I've been thinking more than usual!" Mary said sombrely to herself. "But it hasn't been about work, or about good things at all! I don't know if I ought to do the dancing, if it's going to make me worse in—other ways!"

She had a very definite feeling that to lapse into unhealthy secret ways would be treason to all these happy healthy people who had given her such enjoyment. She looked at Madam, laughing among the girls, and felt positively guilty; and yet she knew what would happen when she went to bed. The stirring of her imagination, to which the Writer of Books had referred, would in her case be turned to unlawful uses. Mary knew it, and felt sick and ashamed; and yet she could not promise to keep away from those enchaining dreams.

But neither could she give up this new interest which was growing on her so strongly. She was equally sure of that.

She was watching the laughing chattering crowd with sombre eyes, when Joy Shirley turned from the rest with a swirl of blue drapery and white underskirt, and came up to her. From across the hall she had seen Mary's grave, almost gloomy face, and it had reminded her

of a half-formed plan. She asked no questions, though Mary was obviously burdened, but plunged into her invitation.

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

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

"It's all right, really. I'm not proposing anything very dreadful, am I? I often ask business people. I've a huge house down there, half empty, and I feel such a pig unless I share it with somebody. Do you think you could come?"

"Oh, what a nice way to put it!" Mary cried. "But you're too kind! Other people with big houses don't feel like that! In the country? How we would love it! But ought we to?"

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

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

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

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

"I think I could, when Mr. Robins's work is finished," Mary said hungrily. "I worked over Easter, because the others wanted to go away and we had extra work to be done. I haven't had any break since last August. I think Mrs. Taylor would let me off. And it would be very good for Biddy. I think we could manage it, Miss Shirley. And how we would enjoy it! Would you really have us?"

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

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

"Good-night! and good luck! I hope you'll enjoy the class!" the Writing Person passed on her way out, as Joy nodded and turned away. "But I say! If you're going to do morris, you'll have to get into a tunic, you know! Morris in a frock, or in a blouse and skirt, would be too awful for words! You'll find the first time as trying as I did, perhaps. But it's worth it. You must forget all about yourself, that's all. I'm coming to watch Miss Robins teach one night; Joy Shirley says she's just Madam over again, without meaning to be. So I shall see how you're getting on. I'm sure you'll love it," and she said good-night again and hurried away to catch her train.

CHAPTER XIII

MARY-DOROTHY'S GYM TUNIC

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

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

"Oh! You'll want some tea! Just one moment, Biddy, and I'll get it for you. Will you see if the kettle's nearly boiling?"

"Don't fag; I've had some. Viv asked me to go with her. I can wait, if you're busy. What are you making, Mary-Dorothy? What are you doing with my tunic?"

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

"Copying—? I say, Mary, old girl, are you really going to do the thing in style? You *are* a good old sport! I never thought you would!" and Biddy came up excitedly. "You're making yourself a gymmy? It's not a new one for me? It *is* for yourself? Oh, don't disappoint me and dash my hopes to the ground!" she pleaded eagerly. "I never thought you'd really do the thing properly!"

Mary looked up, relieved enough to laugh. "I'm not going to make it as short as some of those I saw at the class. Some of them had no skirt to speak of; just a bit of a frill! I don't see any need for that."

"You are a sport!" Biddy said warmly, in frank delight. "Did Jen Robins say you'd got to have one?"

"Oh, no! She never mentioned it. But if all the rest wear them, it seems to me I'd feel worse in a skirt than in a tunic," Mary said grimly. "I may feel queer in this at first; it's years since I wore one! But nobody will know how queer I feel. But they will know if I look different from every one else, by being the only one in a long skirt."

"That's so. You'll show up far less. You are making it nicely, Mary! Those pleats are simply beautiful!"

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

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

"Was Doris properly impressed?"

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

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

They spent several of these evenings together, with mingled music and dressmaking, and much happy looking forward to the first class next week, and to the glorious prospect for the week after. Mary would cut out and plan, and Biddy would sew obediently, but always with her tin whistle in her lap; and every now and then she would take it up and try another of the folk tunes. Jen had called at the office to leave three books of music with Mary and to fetch the first part of her father's manuscript; and to their delight Mary and Biddy found certain of the tunes within their powers. Biddy danced for joy when she had made out "Rufly Tufty" successfully; then settled down eagerly to practise others.

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

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

"They didn't teach us properly at school," she said resentfully. "Jen Robins came to me before that show last week, and told me to watch particularly how none of them, and most of all Madam herself, ever danced on their toes. She said she'd watched me at the party, and I was on my toes all the time, and I'd got to get out of it if I wanted to do folk-dancing well. So she told me to watch and see for myself, and it was true; they weren't on their toes, and they never pointed them once, as we were taught to do. And there were other things we always did that they never did at all. I'm sure I shall never remember! She'll be mad with me!"

But one, at least, of Mary's fears proved unnecessary, simply because, when the moment came, she had no time to think about herself or how she felt. It was very important that she and Biddy should be in time, for they had to take back the borrowed music; Jen had been very insistent that they must not on any account be late. Starting in plenty of time, they were delayed by traffic, which held up their bus; and arrived, hot and annoyed, at five minutes past eight. A girl directed them to a small dressing-room off the big hall, and they hurried across, handing the music to another girl as they went, and getting an impression of many girls in blue tunics standing in a big ring, while Jen, on the platform, addressed them.

"Leave the door open! We'll hear what she's saying," Biddy whispered agitatedly. "And do be quick, Mary, there's a dear! I shan't wait for you if you're long!"

"I expect some of you will always have to be a little late," Jen was saying tactfully. "So we won't begin country-dancing till half-past eight. The keen ones who come early will get half-an-hour's morris. We'll learn the step to-night, and begin using the sticks next time. You saw a stick dance last week. There's one thing I want to say before we begin. I know most of you can't get here till eight; but I'm told a few could manage at half-past seven. I'd like to teach a sword-dance to a few. If we ever want to give a show to your friends, it would be useful to have a sword-dance team. We can do it with six or eight, or we could have two sets. Will any who think they could come early regularly give me their names during the evening, please. But you must be regular. You can't just drift into a sword-dance when you feel like it. Now we'll make a start with the morris step. All do this! Stand with your weight on one foot. Now change your weight to the other. Let the free leg hang loose."

"We mustn't miss this. We shall never get it right if we don't begin with the rest!" Biddy groaned, changing her shoes in frantic haste. "It's that weird step they do in the jolly stick and hanky dances! I'm sure we didn't do it properly at school! Oh, buck up, Mary *dear!*"

Mary fully appreciated the importance of the moment. There was no time to think. She dropped her skirt and coat, tied her plimsolls, and ran after Biddy to find a place in the ring, forgetting everything but the urgent need for haste. When she remembered presently, it was with deep thankfulness that she was wearing a tunic, since every one else in the hall was doing the same. And by the time it was possible to go and explain their late arrival to Jen, Mary had forgotten that she had expected to feel strange. She had done half-an-hour's morris step on the spot, and then going round the hall in a big circle; she had felt how it fitted the rhythm of two new and very fascinating tunes; and her only feeling about a skirt was that it would have been very much in the way, hampering the free movements she had been enjoying so much.

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

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

"A sprite!" Jen laughed down at her, recognising with delight the new glow of enjoyment in Mary's face. "That's very nice of you, Mary-Dorothy, but a very bad comparison. I'm sure sprites never have legs as long as mine! Now if you'd said an O-Cedar Mop on the end of a pole! If it weren't for my hair, you'd be calling me a stork, I suppose; but I never saw a stork with a head like mine!"

"You might say a very curly chrysanthemum on a long stem," Mary smiled.

"That's rather nice, too. Do you write poetry?"

Mary shook her head and flushed. Jen remarked:

"You ought to. You have pretty ideas. Well, and how do you like morris?"

"It's more than liking. I love it! It's what Biddy would call a simply gorgeous feeling."

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

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

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

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

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

"I expected to feel very queer in it at first. But you'd begun teaching the morris, and I had no time to think," Mary said.

"You needn't feel queer. Some people might, but you needn't. You're so neat," Jen explained carefully, but with twinkling eyes demurely downcast. "And you've got such very pretty ankles; you needn't mind showing them off. Some girls have such fat legs! But yours are so neat!"

"Biddy's mourning over hers." Mary had coloured at the compliment. "She was saying to-night she wished she was thinner."

"She's very sturdy. She ought to do morris well; you want some weight! But she must come down off her toes, or she'll never be any good. I shall keep on shouting at her till the idea soaks in."

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

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

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

She was surprised and amused to find how often Jen, and her dances, and their music, came into her mind during the next week. Everything she did, and all her ordinary life, had received a new background. Without the slightest effort on her own part, she found herself dreaming less, because she simply had not time for it. When she had time for thought, in bed, or while busy with dressmaking preparations for the following week, she was always trying to fit movements to tunes, to remember the difference between introductions and figures, which still seemed much alike to her, to disentangle the sequence of events in “Ruffy,” “Peascods,” and “Sellenger’s Round.” After two or three lessons, all this became so clear that she wondered she had ever been puzzled; but by that time new problems had arisen to claim her attention.

It was the same with Biddy; and unconsciously both the sisters were happier for their common interest, which was such a new thing. Biddy went to the pictures with Doris and found the show utterly unsatisfying; and came home to make another new blouse and to practise steps and movements with Mary, who rejoiced, but was wiser than to say so.

“It was stale! Simply futile!” Biddy said scornfully. “I can’t be bothered watching pictures! I want to do things myself! It’s heaps more fun!”

The following Tuesday they stood, with six other girls who had come early, with long wooden swords in their left hands and eyes fixed expectantly on Jen. Mary’s eyes were a trifle apprehensive also; she was inclined to be nervous of this new attempt. Biddy was frankly eager to know what she was to do with her sword, and was amazed to hear she was expected to dance left-handed. The making of the lock thrilled them to the limit; Mary was stunned to find how easily it had been done; but there was a triumphant delight in her bewilderment, at which Jen laughed in sympathy.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER XIV

“OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY”

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

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

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

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

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

When their own dance came there was more time to talk. “Take care of me in the third figure!” said Jen. “I never know how to join up. Did you have a good time to-day?”

“Yes, but I always feel bad after seeing those poor little kids. Wish I could do more than give them a run into the country! They loved it, of course; we had a picnic again, beside a stream. They’d never seen running water! They were quite thrilled; couldn’t believe it went on all the time! Your crusade is getting on, then?”

“Oh, splendidly! You never saw any one happier than Mary-Dorothy when she’s dancing. And she isn’t so bad, considering. She’s got more spunk than I’d have believed; she tries everything, and loves morris. She was rather terrified of ‘Flamorough,’ but she had a shot at it and loved it too. I think she’s really plucky. You can see she’s never done anything of the kind, and yet she won’t funk a single thing. And she’s made herself a tunic!” triumphantly.

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

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

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

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

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

“Biddy couldn’t quite believe you would really come. I knew you would, but I couldn’t quite believe we should really live till such a glorious thing happened!” Mary was a little breathless with her run downstairs carrying her case.

“Joy wants you to sit beside her. She’s sure Biddy would chatter too much; and she can’t answer questions while she’s driving. Do you mind the front seat?”

“Oh, we’ll go just where you like! But Biddy would love the front, and she wouldn’t talk.”

“Then she wouldn’t enjoy the ride,” Joy turned in her place, pushing up her goggles on to her cap. “Come and sit by me, Mary-Dorothy. Jen and Biddy can babble behind. Besides, you feel the wind less here.”

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

“I feel like a duchess,” and Biddy lay luxuriously back in hers. “Did you say this car is called ‘Peace?’”

“Yes, Eirene. She has a most unpeaceful existence, though, always running up and down to town. But nothing of Joy’s could ever be peaceful for long,” Jen mocked.

Under cover of the noise of the engine, Joy spoke quickly to Mary, her eyes fixed steadily on the road in front. “I’m so glad you’ve come. I’ve an idea it may be very good for your Biddy. I know you’re troubled about her; I’m hoping this will help. She’s evidently got chummy with a rather silly lot. You couldn’t help that happening, of course; she has to meet all kinds, and if she can’t choose among them she’s done for. I’ve two very jolly kids at home, just about her age, and absolutely healthy and normal. Well, Rosamund is! Maidlin has a temperament, though she doesn’t know that’s what’s the matter with her. She just thinks she has a very bad temper at times. But she’s getting the better of it; she’s a good kiddy. I thought if your Biddy made friends with my two, she might care less for the town set. Mine will be more like the girls she’s been used to at school.”

“It’s more than kind of you to think of it,” Mary said gratefully. “I had been thinking something of the sort myself. But what makes you and Miss Robins so thoughtful? You’ve taken a real interest in us, and puzzled out our problems as if they were your own. I’ve never met any one before who really took trouble about other people. What makes you two so different?”

Joy hooted wildly to help an undecided small child to make up his mind, and sighed in relief as he ran back out of the way.

“I didn’t know we were different! We don’t want to be utter selfish pigs, that’s all. We seem to have everything we could want; I’m sure I don’t know why I should have so much! You wait till you see, then perhaps you’ll understand. It’s the feeling of responsibility, the need to share one’s good things, I suppose. I know I’d feel an awful slacker if I sat down and enjoyed my house and my friends and my money, and kept them all for myself and my own little circle. You have to go outside. I know Jen feels the same.”

“I wish everybody did! The world would be very different. Miss Robins said something of the kind about the dancing.”

“Yes, she loves it so that she’s always aching to pass it on. How do you like her classes?”

“Oh, it’s the jolliest evening of the week!” Mary laughed. “The club girls all say so. We learn a lot and get scolded a lot; but we laugh so much that it’s all very refreshing. Such a change from offices and business life!”

“I’m sure you laugh, when Jen’s teaching!”

“Oh, but we don’t laugh at her! She teaches beautifully! She shows us everything, and I love to watch her. And she’s so encouraging, when I’m sure there’s little enough to be encouraging about! She’s always kind; and she never laughs at us. But she keeps us laughing all the time.”

“Doesn’t she get a bit hectic now and then?” Joy grinned. “Get away, you brute!” to a yellow dog.

“Oh, she gets fearfully worked up, and comes flying off the platform to hurl us into our places. That’s what it feels like. I always feel like a cockle-shell being rammed by a battleship.”

“Good! I’ll repeat that with great effect,” Joy said joyfully. “She’s caught that trick from Madam. They’re both big; Jen has lots of Madam’s little ways. I saw her teach once!”

"There's a row of chairs against the platform, and their backs stand up that much above the edge," Mary measured three inches. "I hold my breath every evening, waiting for the time when she'll catch her foot in them and come down with a crash and break her neck. But she always leaps over them somehow."

"She always will. You needn't be nervy about Jenny-Wren. Now we're going to shoot ahead into the country. This is Uxbridge, and we leave the tramlines, which I hate, and have good country roads. Here we are in Buckinghamshire!" as they flashed across several bridges in quick succession. "Good-bye, London! We're clear of it at last. See the may!"

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

Through long valleys and across windy commons the white road led them westward, with low rolling hills on each side; green hills, brown ploughed hills, hills glowing with gorse, or covered with green-veiled woods, or gray with bare-stemmed beeches and the bright red stretch of dead leaves beneath. Every hedge and bush was snowed under with white; every field had a carpet of golden buttercups.

"What wonderful colour!" Mary breathed.

"Here's another spot of colour for you!" Joy said presently, as they reached Wycombe and she drew Eirene up at big gates set in a high wall. For a moment Mary wondered if this were the famous "Hall" to which they were invited. Then she saw that it was not so; the big square building within was obviously a school, set in a wide, bare playground.

"This is the renowned spot which had the privilege of receiving our President Cicely and witnessing the birth of the Hamlet Club; then of welcoming Joan and myself, and later of sheltering Jenny-Wren," Joy began impressively. "Much-to-be-envied school; what? Did I hear you say 'pitied,' Biddy Devine?"

"No, oh, no! You never—I never did!" Biddy protested, laughing.

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

Biddy was leaning forward eagerly, looking for the girls. She had been trying to find out from Jen why Joy had had to "adopt" them, but Jen, for once, had not been talkative. Rosamund's relations lived in the North—her parents were abroad—she had been sent to Wycombe as a boarder, but the air of the valley-town had not suited her, so Joy had invited her to live out in the country at the Hall; Maidlin was fourteen, a year younger, and an orphan, and Joy was bringing her up. That was all Jen had been willing to say, except the comment that Joy was a jolly good sort, and always trying to let other people get the good of her money when they needed it; an opinion Biddy shared heartily. Since Jen would tell no more, Biddy had to turn to the girls themselves to see what she could guess from looking at them.

There was considerable difference in size between them, though only a year in age. Rosamund was tall, and big for fifteen, with two yellow plaits; Maidlin was small and neat, and very dark, with black eyes and dusky hair in a thick pigtail. Both wore the school hat and colours; and the blue tunics and green girdles reminded Mary at once of the morris class, when the elder girls had all worn similar ones. But Rosamund's knitted coat was vivid emerald green, and Maidlin's jersey was lemon-yellow, so they certainly managed to brighten up the grey asphalt as they came flying across the playground.

"You're awfully late, Joy! We got tired of waiting and went in to do some prep., so that we'd have more time to talk to Biddy at night. You are Biddy, aren't you?" Rosamund had opened the door of the car and was jumping in before she had finished introducing herself. "Joy says she expects you can do a hundred words a minute in shorthand. Can you? How on earth do you manage it? I'm just beginning; we have a commercial course here, and I'm going to take it. I think it will be such fun to know how people do things in business! Will you tell me all about your college? Don't you loathe bookkeeping? I should think the typing part is rather jolly, isn't it? Aren't you coming in, Maidie?"

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

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

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

"Yes, but it doesn't matter squashing the family! Miss Devine's a visitor."

"She isn't nearly as big as Jen," Maidlin argued.

"And she likes being squashed, when the squashing's done by her friends," Mary added. "There's heaps of room for a little one! But I *am* feeling crushed, Miss Shirley. Why have you stopped giving me my new name? Must I go back to being 'Miss Devine?' Remember, it always makes me think of the office!"

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

"Oh!" said Mary, and coloured shyly. "Oh, but it's different!"

"I don't see why?"

"Joy said I could call her 'Miss Joy' when I wanted to quarrel with her," remarked Maidlin.

"And do you often?" Mary asked, half laughing.

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

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

"Good child! She's getting on. People are so terrifying, aren't they, Maidie? I remember you were once terrified of me; at least you ran away from me."

"I wasn't frightened of you," Maidlin said bluntly. "It was for other reasons."

“All of which disappeared when you got close enough to look at them carefully. Now here is where we take to the hills, Mary-Dorothy. You’ve seen our woods and fields and orchards and commons. We could go all the way round by the low road, as the train does, but we all prefer the hills. Now, Piper!” over her shoulder to Jen. “Where’s your pipe?—

‘All the tune that he could play
Was Over the hills and far away.’ ”

“Oh, but it isn’t!” Jen retorted. “If I get out my pipe, you’ve got to stop the car and walk her home, and I’ll stride along at the head of the procession piping the ‘Helston Furry.’ ”

Joy chuckled. “Not at this distance from home!” and she let the car leap ahead and race along the broad road across the high, open ridge.

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

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

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

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

Beyond the gray boles of the beeches were stretches of sunlit lawn, only seen in glimpses, however, because the wall of trees was so thick. The beeches had been thinned and properly tended for generations, and had grown to magnificent size in consequence. The ground beneath the gray-green columns was dull rich red with the leaves of centuries.

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

“They’ve been taken care of. I won’t have them touched, except for their own sake. Of course, I could make fortunes out of them, but I’d never do it.” Joy leaned forward and stopped the car.

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

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

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

Jen protested. “Joy, don’t be mad!”

“My dear, I am. You know that by now. I’m sure Biddy would like to be a procession.”

“I’d simply love it!” Biddy chuckled.

“Well, make Eirene cough. That’s noisy enough.”

“Oh, *no*!” Mary cried, laughing. “No, please!”

“Jenny-Wren, you’re an unromantic little object. Wouldn’t you rather be piped home, Mary-Dorothy?”

“Ever so much! It would be quite in keeping with all this,” Mary said warmly.

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

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

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

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

Joy, with laughing eyes, brought Eirene along as silently as she could, following at a respectful distance behind the yellow figure between the gray walls and under the swaying green, where the great boughs swept down to meet. The wind was all shut out from this tunnel of trees, and the sweet high notes of the pipe came clearly back. An astonished blackbird somewhere high overhead began to talk about the strange music; a thrush asked eager questions; a starling screamed an excited answer; and a chaffinch bubbled out his little story in imitation of the new unseen bird.

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

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

“I like being a procession!” Biddy chuckled.

CHAPTER XV

THE ABBEY AND THE HALL

"Oh!" said Mary and Biddy together.

"Oh, how absolutely topping!" Biddy added.

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

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

"I don't for a minute believe we're really us!" Biddy had informed Joy more than once.

Now, in the early evening, and preceded once more by the piper—for Joy had refused to go without "being a procession," and Jen, in mingled amusement and indignation, had yielded and marched ahead again—they had crossed the lawn, where the lilacs and laburnums and hawthorns made a wall of many colours and sweetest scents, and entered a little path among the bushes.

Jen slipped the pipe up her sleeve. "Not here," she said gravely. "No, Joy. Not this time," and Joy yielded in her turn and did not tease.

The strangers had no idea where they were going. They had simply been told to follow, and "the procession" had formed on the lawn again. Rosamund and Maidlin had been sent back to do their preparation for next day, much to their annoyance; they had only stayed because of Joy's threat that there would be no "fun with Biddy" till the homework was done. So the procession down the shrubbery path, following Joy and a big bunch of keys, was of Mary and Biddy and Jen only. Jen kept in the background now that she had ceased to lead, and watched Mary with friendly interest.

Joy unlocked an ancient door in the wall. "Seven hundred years old, perhaps!" she said briefly. "Oh, this is much older than the house! That's Tudor, brought up to date, first by my grandfather and then by us. Now, Mary-Dorothy, this is my cousin Joan's treasure. I love my house, but she loves this more. I hardly believed she'd ever marry and leave it."

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

"It's another chapter of the wonderful fairy-tale, Miss Shirley!" Biddy said eagerly.

"Another bit of an impossibly beautiful dream! We shall wake up presently and find ourselves in London," Mary said wistfully, as she followed the rest down the cobbled path, and through an arching tunnel in the gray wall beyond.

The vivid green of the cloister garth, the evident age of the long, low buildings on three sides of it, and the high, beautiful refectory on the fourth, the pointed arches of the chapter-house, the broken tracery of the cloister windows, the peace of it all, stilled even Biddy to awed silence. The trees in the woods outside murmured all the time, a steady whisper like the

distant sound of the sea; the rooks were calling in the gardens of the Hall, and the blackbirds and thrushes had been roused by Jen's piping to lively discussion of its meaning; but these were the only sounds that broke the silence; the sleep of centuries seemed over the Abbey garth and ruins.

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

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

"But it didn't spoil it. We weren't noisy. The moonlight bewitched us, and we danced like shadows, out there on the garth, Mary-Dorothy. Now come and see where Joan's white-robed monks used to sleep, and eat, and hold their councils, and care for their gardens, and look after the sick old folks."

"Jen can tell you all the stories," said Joy, and her movement broke the spell. "I want a word with Ann Watson. She's Joan's caretaker, and shows people round and recites dates like a gramophone. But we don't let tourists in after six, so you'll have it all to yourselves."

"Oh, I'm glad of that! It would spoil it to see crowds everywhere!" Mary said fervently. "I'm glad you let people in; everybody ought to see it! But all the same I'm glad to see it when it's empty."

"We only come in before twelve or after six. But we couldn't keep it all to ourselves," Joy remarked. "That would really be piggish!" and she went off to talk to the caretaker, who had appeared on the other side of the quiet green garth.

Joy joined them presently in the chapter-house, but left the telling of the story to Jen, whose love and enthusiasm for the Abbey were manifest. By the time they turned homewards the ruins were no longer empty for Mary, for Jen had peopled them with Cistercian monks and Abbots and lay brethren, and even one beautiful heroine, the Ladye Jehane from the Hall, whose buried treasure of jewels had been found in the unknown Saxon crypt by Jen herself and Joan, one memorable day so many years ago.

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

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

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

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

Mary crimsoned. "No, I've never done it in my life. Biddy, don't be silly! Don't be mean!"

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

"Is this the clue?" Joy asked dramatically.

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

"Oh, you could manage 'cat' and 'hat' and 'mat!' 'The cat—sat—on the mat—in an old hat!' " Joy said helpfully.

"I only said 'poetry' because all this place seems to want poetry," Biddy explained. "It makes even me feel poetical! She writes topping letters, Miss Robins! You should have read

the screed she wrote about that party at Plaistow, and you, and the music, and the classes she'd been to see!"

"I wish I had!" Jen said yearningly.

"It was only talking into a letter, for some old aunts away in the Colonies," Mary protested.

"She ought to have made it into an article for the papers. She can describe things rippingly," Biddy said eagerly. "You just see them while you're reading. I'd like to read the letter she could write all about this place!"

"So would I!" Jen said fervently. "Oh, well, we mustn't tease her! She's here for a holiday. You shan't be worried, Mary-Dorothy! But if I were you I'd try again. Now come on home to the children. They'll have finished their prep., and be wailing for Biddy. I wonder they haven't come after us," and she led the way back to the garden and the Hall, and Mary followed, much relieved that the subject of her attempts at writing had been dismissed, though a little surprised that she had escaped so easily.

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

Joy stood looking after them. "Now I wonder what those two have been up to? Rosamund, I mean, of course. Maidie's been in it, too, but only as an accomplice. She wouldn't meet my eye. But did you ever see anything so guileless as Rosamunda, Jenny-Wren? It was beautiful; but she overdid it. She gave the show away. They've been making apple-pie beds! Do you know anything of this, Aunt?"

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

"Stop them! Not for a second! If it pleases them, let them mess up our beds as much as they like! All the same, I'm going to remake mine. They'll be frightfully sold when nothing happens! Come and investigate, you two!"

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

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

"Biddy's a more likely victim," said Jen. "Mine's all right. Why am I thus left out in the cold? I feel hurt!—Wait a sec., though!—oh, the little bounders!"

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

"I just looked to make sure! The little rotters have sewn up the arms and legs! Oh, wouldn't I have said things if I'd only found it out at night!"

"Rosamunda's worked hard. I wonder if her prep.'s done?" Joy chuckled. "I thought she gave in rather meekly! Rip them up, Jenny-Wren! The stitches will be inches big! I'll fetch you Ros's nightie, and you can have your r-r-revenge!"

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

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

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

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

"Unless the state of her nightie has given her warning," Jen said grimly, busily unpicking the stitches in her sleeves. "Joy, you know you ought not to encourage them! It's no wonder sensible people go crazy when they get near you. You're every bit as bad as the children."

Joy dropped a bath towel over her head. "My dear, I like it, and you like it, and they like it, and everybody likes it. We all like to be like that. And it does nobody any harm. I'm always telling you I'm only pretending to be grown up."

"It's a jolly poor pretence at times!" Jen struggled out of the towel. "I say, there's the post! You'd better go and get your millions of letters! This job will take Mary-Dorothy and me ten minutes yet."

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

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

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

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

"I'm just afraid they'll guess there's something up, and find them in time!" she said mournfully. "I'm afraid we've overdone it, Mary-Dorothy! If we could only arrange a failure of the electric light at bedtime! I wonder if Cook would tell me where the meter is? And I must warn Annie not to come and turn down the beds. I'll say we've done all that's necessary. She'll guess there's something up!"

"I suppose she's used to you? Are you always like this?" Mary asked politely.

"You ask Joy what's the proper time to eat cream buns," Jen said cryptically. "It's not a riddle, but sober fact; not very sober, though! I foresee a giggly dinner, when we shall all be trying to look innocent and failing miserably. Now shall we go down and have some tennis? Aren't they enjoying it, the little dears!" at the shouts which came up from the court.

"I haven't played for years, but I'd like to watch you play. You'd just make up the four," Mary said eagerly.

Jen turned on her in mock reproof. "I don't approve of lookers-on! If you don't play, it's time you began. Come and have a lesson. Maidlin's only learning," and as usual her insistence won the day.

CHAPTER XVI

MAKING BIDDY FEEL AT HOME

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

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

Jen dropped on a low chair beside Mary in a dark corner. "Joy doesn't need any lights, or any music. She makes it up. This is all her own music. We're still waiting for her to astonish the world as a great composer; she's been making music since she was a tiny child. She says she's waiting, too; and perhaps she never will do anything great. Now that she's rich, she has so many other things that must be done, and she won't leave them. She says they must come first; and they're the way she has to earn her money. She's very conscientious, and tries to do the right thing, although she fools so much. And she's good to so many people; you don't know half the jolly things she does. So the music gets pushed to the background. But it's there. She can play like this for hours."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good-night, all!" sang Rosamund. "Come on Maidlin! You've hugged Joy three times already!"

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

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

Biddy closed their door. "Mary, I'm so glad we're sleeping together! I haven't had a chance to speak to you yet. Isn't it the most gorgeous place? And aren't they a topping crowd? Aren't you jolly glad we've got to know them?"

"The loveliest place, and the kindest people, I've ever seen," Mary said warmly.

"Yes, that's how I feel. And it may be a jolly good thing for us. Oh, don't be soft, Mary!" as her sister turned on her indignantly. "You've got to think of that sort of thing! Or if you won't, I've got to do it for you!"

"Biddy, I wish you wouldn't talk like that!" Mary said uneasily. "It's a side of you I don't like. As if all you thought of was how you could make use of people! Can't you like them for their own sake?"

"Rosamund and I have been making plans," Biddy ignored the protest and went on eagerly. "I say, Mary, Jen was exaggerating when she told you Rosamund was an heiress."

"She didn't say that. She said one of the girls was an heiress," Mary said sharply. "I wish I hadn't repeated it to you. You haven't been discussing it with Rosamund, surely, Biddy? You couldn't do anything so awful!"

"Oh, but she meant Rosamund! Don't you know who poor little Maidlin is? That woman in the Abbey, the caretaker, is her aunt. Joy must have taken a fancy to Maidie and decided to adopt her. Her father and mother are dead. You can see she adores Joy. She talked about her aunty, and told me she lived in the Abbey."

"She's not a bit like her aunt," Mary said, rather startled by this information. "And she has the best of everything."

"Oh, Joy's given her everything! But Rosamund isn't so much of an heiress either. She started asking questions about coll., and shorthand, and said something about going in for it in earnest; so I just said, 'But you won't need to do anything! You're going to be awfully well off, aren't you?' That wasn't asking questions! Anyway, she didn't mind a scrap. She just said, 'Oh, not so very! Only so-so!' So then we started making plans. I said I didn't want to stick in an office all my life, as you've done, old thing! I told her I'd like to be a private secretary, and travel, or get a post abroad as foreign correspondent for some big firm. She thought that was a topping idea; but she said it would be rather a joke if she could do it, too, and then later on, when we'd had some experience, we'd start a typewriting office of our own in London. Don't you think it would be——"

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

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

"Well, I thought I'd got a—a hedgehog or a porcupine in mine!" and Biddy bounced out into the passage, her brown curls unfastened and hanging wildly over her nightgown. "Did you put it there, you wretch? I'm sure Mary didn't!"

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

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

"What's the matter? Is it a fire?" she asked innocently, taking out the slides that held back her bobbed hair and letting the curls fall in wild confusion.

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

"The usual way. Shall I demonstrate? Why? What's the difficulty?" Jen asked mildly.

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

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

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

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

"So kind of you!" Biddy giggled. "I'm feeling quite at home, thank you!"

Joy's door opened with indignant emphasis. "Jen Robins, you're a disgrace!—a traitor to your friends! Go home at once! I'll never ask you here again! Where's my nightie?"

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

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

"You are a simply priceless crowd!" Biddy, helpless with laughter, collapsed on the floor and leant her head on Rosamund's shoulder. "Do please tell me who did what to which?"

"What's the matter, 'Travellers' Joy?' You seem agitated about something," Jen asked gently. "Is there anything wrong?"

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

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

"Jen's the biggest! She'll win!" shouted Biddy.

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

Mary smiled down at her. "Do you ever fight like this with Rosamund?"

"I? No, I—I can't. I don't know how they do it. I always feel so funny."

"I think I should feel funny, too, so there are two of us who feel alike," Mary assured her. "But it's fun to watch them, isn't it?"

"Where's my nightie, Jen Robins?" Joy was demanding.

"Go and look!" gasped Jen. "Go and hunt all night! And don't murder your guests in your own house! It isn't done in the best circles! If you kill me, I'll never come again!"

"Guest! A viper I've been nourishing in my bosom! A cuckoo I've welcomed to my nest! What else have you done to my room, I'd like to know?"

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

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

"You'd better fade away, Joy. Auntie's really shocked," Jen giggled.

"Well, Auntie, she's been doing the most unutterable crimes in my room, messing up all my things!" Joy protested. "I had to give her a lesson!"

"I hope she'll profit by it!" Jen mocked, tossing aside the pillows and sitting up, hot and dishevelled. "Mary-Dorothy, aren't you quite shocked? Isn't she brutal? Oh, get me a drink, somebody! I'm hot! I've swallowed half a pillow, and feathers are so fluffy when they stick in your throat!"

"Lemonade!" said Rosamund dramatically. "Come on, Biddy!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You'll slop it all over your bed!" Rosamund said warningly.

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

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

"Mary-Dorothy, aren't we the maddest crowd you've ever met?" Jen demanded, refreshed by the lemonade.

"Quite!" Mary assured her laughing. "I never met any one quite like you before. I feel rather stunned, as you may have seen. But it's a very pleasant form of madness!"

“At times! And for those looking on!” Jen sighed. “It’s rather wearing for those taking part!”

“We’re all exhausted!” Joy said solemnly. “And, my hat! I’d forgotten to-morrow’s early breakfast! You infants will lose your train if you don’t fly off to bed this instant! Hop away, now, Madalena! Rosamund, I want one word with you—no more! In private, in my room, my child!”

“I didn’t do it!” Rosamund said indignantly “I sewed up Jen’s pyjamas, but I never touched yours!”

“No, you made me an apple-pie bed, which I unmade hours ago! Oh, I know it was Jenny-Wren left tracks all over my room! I recognised her—er—dainty touch. Come and help me find my night attire! I will not sleep clothed in dusters!”

“I’d like to help, Joy,” Maidlin ventured.

“You jump into bed, baby. Don’t trouble about those crumbs. Jen shall apologise to Annie in the morning. I’m not going to keep Ros more than a minute,” and Joy kissed the troubled little face. “Perhaps I’m going to row her for keeping you out of bed! Good-night, Mary-Dorothy! This is positively our last appearance for to-night!”

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

CHAPTER XVII

JOY DISAPPOINTS THE PRESIDENT

"Look here, Rosamunda! You'd better tell Maidlin every word I say! I oughtn't to have left her out. Don't let the kiddy think I've secrets with you. I suppose you know the poor infant is furiously jealous of you, where I'm concerned; terrified I'm going to like you best, and all that sort of rot?"

"I know she looks funny if I talk to you too much."

"She's trying to get over it. She feels she isn't quite one of us, even yet; though you've helped her a lot. Go on as you're doing. She's better every day, and most of it's owing to you. You can do more for her than any of us, in some ways. I asked you to help, and you're doing it jolly well. But that's not what you're to repeat to Maidlin! It's this. Don't say anything to the Biddy child about Madalena's Italian fortune; it's no business of Biddy's. You haven't been babbling about it already, have you?" quickly, as Rosamund looked up at her, as if about to speak.

"Not a word! I was going to ask you first. You told me not to talk about it at school, so I thought it might be the same with Biddy."

"Good child! It is the same——!"

"But Biddy's been trying to find out. I think she knows something; I don't know how. And I rather think she thinks I'm the one that's an heiress. I want to know what you want me to do."

"Nothing," Joy said promptly. "It's not Biddy's business, any way you look at it. She may have heard something from one of the others before she came here. Change the subject if she asks you straight out."

"She knows about Mrs. Watson being Maidie's aunt. Maidie told her herself."

"That's all right! I don't mind her knowing that," Joy said cryptically. "But don't babble about the heiress side of Maidie, and tell Madalena not to, either. Now hop off to bed, my good kid, and leave me to hunt for my belongings. Several of them seem to be missing."

"Shan't I stay and help you?"

"No, skip away and let Maidie get to sleep."

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

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

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

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

"I want to know what it was, that her business-like Daddy said was no good at all. I think he might have helped her a little! Told her what would be good, for instance. She's evidently 'got something in her that wants to come out,' as she puts it. He sat on her first attempts, and she's never tried again. Doesn't it help to explain her?"

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

“Well, if you were the beginnings of a poet, or a writer of some kind, and somebody sat on you heavily and told you your work was no good, wouldn’t you want to curl up and die? And if you couldn’t quite do that—if you’d got a little sister to bring up, for instance—wouldn’t you go on with your everyday work, but go all dead and hopeless inside? I feel I’m beginning to understand Mary-Dorothy a little. If that’s what happened, she’s not quite such a puzzle as she seemed. And I’m going to bring her to life and start her writing again, if there’s any way to do it.”

“I’ve forgiven you for sewing up my nightdress-case!” Joy announced impressively.

Jen stared at her blankly. “Whatever has that got to do with Mary-Dorothy? You make me dizzy, Joy Shirley!”

“Not if you think it out. You’re such a very nice little thing, really, and you have such a very kind little heart, that——”

A pillow hurled by Jen caught her full in the face. She removed the ruddy hair from her eyes and mouth, sat on the pillow, and continued unmoved.

“That I really like you very much, and can put up with your moments of temporary insanity and lapses into your second childhood. As, for instance, this most ungrateful way of receiving my entirely unsolicited testimonial to the beauty and sweetness of your character. How do you propose to set about developing Mary-Dorothy’s gifts?”

“Ask that Writing Person’s advice, next time I see her,” Jen said practically.

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

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

“Not ragging! Have mercy on us, Jenny-Wren!”

“No, I mean music and dancing. I’m sure it will help to wake up her imagination; I believe it’s gone to sleep for years, since her Daddy sat on it. You know how that Writer Person speaks about folk-dancing; how she says it helps her, and she always gets new ideas after classes. I’m going to see if the same thing happens with Mary-Dorothy.”

“Going to give her dancing lessons here?”

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

She proceeded to carry out this programme next day, when Rosamund and Maidlin had been whirled off in the car to school; for Joy relented at the last moment, and agreed to spare them the long and hurried walk to the station and the awkward train journey. The excitement of the early ride helped to reconcile them to leaving Biddy to make holiday while they went to “swot in dingy old classrooms,” as Rosamund said; the friendship was progressing rapidly, and both she and Biddy were full of plans for the week-end.

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

“The clubs ought to be long clay pipes, but you only use pipes when you’ve learned it. You’d smash them a dozen times while you were practising,” Jen explained. “I’ve seen Madam dance across real pipes and never touch them, but I couldn’t. I can play the first tune,

but not all the changes. But one will do while you're learning. Joy shall play the whole thing when we go indoors, for the third-figure change of scale is rather gorgeous. It's the old tune of 'Greensleeves.' "

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

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

"You ought to have a private secretary!" Biddy called after her. "A nice shorthand-typist would save you heaps of fag!"

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

"I'm going to give you a lesson every day," Jen remarked, when they were both breathless but delighted to find the dance really not so difficult as it looked. "You want heaps of practice, Mary-Dorothy; you're stiff all over, but that will get better the more you do. Biddy isn't stiff, but she's untidy and careless; in her dancing, I mean, of course. You're too careful; you don't let yourself go. You and Biddy want shaking up together. You're going to work hard, except on the days I'm in town."

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

"I must go up to town on Tuesday. There's the club at night; I can't let the girls down, when I've just taken them on," Jen said gravely. "It's very jolly here; I always love coming, and I've lived here such a lot that it feels like home. But when I took on the club, I knew if I came away with Joy I'd have to go home for a night every week. It's no good half doing things. And Father and Mother want to see me, and I want to be sure they're all right. So I'm going up to town on Tuesday, and Joy will bring me back on Thursday. She always spends one day each week in town, taking crippled East End children out into the country in the car. The Pixie finds the children and has them ready, and Joy does everything she can think of to give them a good time. I expect some of them look back on their day out with Joy as the great day of their lives."

"I can understand that," Mary said quietly. "She, and you, seem to spread happiness wherever you go. It's a great gift."

"Oh, I don't! But Joy certainly does; I agree with you there!"

But Mary reserved her opinion on the other point.

On Saturday, after a thorough exploration of the secret passages between the Abbey and the Hall and of the underground church below the Abbey ruins, the dancing class was reinforced by Rosamund and Maidlin, and Jen piped "Rufty Tufty" and made the other four dance till Rosamund cried out for a change of tune. It was the only dance for four that Mary and Biddy knew, and Maidlin, they found, was quite a beginner, too; so Jen put away the pipe, coaxed Mrs. Shirley to come as a partner, and arranged a set of six on the terrace. Joy sat at

the piano just inside the open window, and Jen proceeded to teach “The Old Mole” and “The Black Nag” and “Picking Up Sticks.”

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

“Which of our married couples is it? Joy, here’s a side-car!” Jen cried. “Feels like dear old Cheltenham! Oh, it’s the President! I hoped it was Joan!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Doesn’t know where they live!” Cicely Everett said indignantly. “They *must* be important friends! Who are they, Jen?”

“It’s no use, President,” Jen said swiftly. “It’s East End cripples; she takes them out in the car for a day in the country. The Pixie finds them through the club at Plaistow. I don’t suppose even she knows where they live. Joy can’t possibly put them off; and she’ll never disappoint them. She gives them the time of their lives.”

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

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

“Laugh if you want to,” she said grimly. “I don’t care a rap. But if you’d seen what I’ve seen, Mrs. Everett, you wouldn’t want to laugh. And you’d know why I can’t disappoint those kiddies. It’s little enough to do for them. If you knew what one day in the country means to them, and if you’d seen what some of them are like, you’d feel as I’m coming to do, that a day

isn't enough; that there ought to be a house in the village where they could stay for a week. You'd want to run a country home for them. I'm still looking for a matron for my girls' hostel; but when I've found her, I guess I'll have to begin hunting up a mother for a children's village home."

"I had no idea you'd gone in for this kind of thing! Somebody might have warned me!" the President said weakly. "Since when has it happened, Jen? And why?—Oh, I'm not objecting! I'm not even criticising! It's topping, and awfully noble, and all that. But I'm stunned. I'm still gasping. She never showed any signs of it before. What's happened to her?"

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

"It's the biggest shock I've ever had," Cicely assured her husband earnestly. "To find 'Travellers' Joy' thinking of anybody but herself!"

"Cicely, you pig!" Jen cried indignantly.

"Oh, but I'm not!" Joy explained calmly. "It's the jolliest thing I've ever found, giving those kids a jolly time. I simply love those rides with them. I have quite as good a time as they do. It's the best fun I know."

"Well, that's one way to look at it!" Cicely rose and turned to her husband. "Come on, Dick! We've got to run round all those people again and see if they can picnic with us on Friday instead. I won't have the party without Joy, though if I'd had any idea she had such pressing engagements I'd have asked her first. Does she take anything else out for drives on Friday, by the way?" she asked anxiously of Jen.

"Friday is at your service," Joy assured her cheerfully. "I'm sorry to give you so much fag, but Thursday is not."

"It's a fearful fag! I shall have to write to Joan and Jacky-boy, too," Cicely groaned. "Bother you, Joy Shirley!"

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

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HAMLET CLUB

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

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

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

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

The ancient spring festival duly took place, and the tune of "Laudnum Bunches" recalled to Mary for months the sight of the snow-laden hedges and the scent of the may. For Jen piped it incessantly, declaring it the "most springish" of all the morris tunes—"in more ways than one," she added significantly—till Joy implored her to make it "Trunkles" for a change.

"Can't. Can't play 'Trunkles.' The beastly thing's got a flat right in the middle, and I haven't got to middle flats yet. I can manage a flat seventh, but not a flat fifth," Jen complained. "You can have 'Rodney' or 'Hunting the Squirrel' or 'Mother Oxford.' But I haven't got to 'Trunkles' yet."

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

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

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

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

"Oh, we couldn't let you go till you've joined in a meeting of the Hamlet Club, and danced in our barn! It's only through the Hamlet Club and the President that we exist, as a crowd of friends. It held us all together for years; then took us to Cheltenham, where we met Madam and the Pixie and all the rest,—the real folk-dancers!—and Cicely and Joan met their men. The Club's still going strong, under the reigning Queen, our Rosamunda. She looked

awfully jolly at her coronation, and the girls are all keen on her. But we Queens won't be in robes and crowns on Thursday; we want some fun sometimes, so we're going to dance."

"Will it be in tunics?" Biddy asked eagerly.

"Oh, no, not for a party! Dancing frocks. Your pretty pink will do very well. But you must have a white cap if you want to dance as a woman. We can lend you that."

"Lend it to Mary," said Biddy. "I'm always her man."

"Oh, but you must change about. It's a frightful mistake only to know one place."

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

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

"She's so big. She's everywhere at once," suggested Rosamund, looking up from her prep.

"It's not only that, silly. Mary-Dorothy, don't you miss the child?" Joy asked maternally.

"It's just the same when you go away for a night, Joy," Maidlin remarked. "Something's gone. The house is different."

"I'm sure it's quieter!" Joy grinned.

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

"The President's picnic will be only part of the crowd, after all. Jen and I won't be the only missing links," Joy remarked. "If this old man's illness is really serious—I know they were anxious about him at the wedding time—it may decide things for Joan. Jack Raymond has been thinking of leaving the Army; he's the only son, and his father wanted him at home. This may settle matters. I wish it would! We've all been afraid Joan would have to go off to India or somewhere with her regiment; Malta, or Egypt, or some other awful place! 'Awful,' because it would take her away from us. That's what comes of marrying into the Army. I want them to settle down at home. They could run across to see us in Jack's side-car in a couple of hours at any time. I want Joan settled safely near me! And of course she'd like to be near her mother. Aunt's awfully disappointed that she won't see her this week."

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

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

"It's as if some one stirred up a pool full of floating jewels!" Biddy murmured sentimentally.

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

The girls had all appeared in what Joy called “dancing frocks”—not ordinary evening dresses, but loose cool frocks of cotton or muslin or linen, in bright rich colours, each girl in the one she loved best.

Cicely Everett, very much “The President” and the presiding genius, and very warmly cheered on her arrival, wore rich dark red; Joy was in apple green; Jen in deep blue; Miriam and Marguerite, two married but very early dancers, in lilac, and in strawberry pink. Rosamund wore golden brown, which set off her yellow plaits well; Maidlin’s black hair hung over a frock of bright yellow; Dorothy Darley was in violet. Most of the frocks were finished off with white collars of linen or lace, and cuffs on the short sleeves; all were full-skirted and short, and easy to dance in. The scene altogether was made up of brilliant colour and keen enjoyment, and made a picture Mary would never forget.

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

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

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

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

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

“You’ll be over-excited now, in a minute, when you spill that milk over your frock!” Joy said suggestively. “Mary-Dorothy, I remember her umpteen years ago—well, about seven!—a hefty kid all eyes and long legs and yellow pigtails, hauled out of her beauty sleep by Joan and dressed in her white frock at eleven o’clock at night. We fed her with milk, and sandwiches by the handful, and she groused because we said she wasn’t old enough for coffee; and then we all crept away to dance by moonlight in the Abbey.”

“And next morning Jack and Della wouldn’t believe I’d been up till two, until they saw the sausage rolls and biscuits I’d brought them from our supper in the cloisters,” Jen’s sandwich had disappeared, and she found Mary beside her offering another. “Oh, thanks so much, Mary-Dorothy! But I ought to be waiting on you!”

“Oh, no! You danced five times as much as I did. And you’ve come all the way from town.”

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

“Aunty, it’s too bad! It’s disgusting!” Joy burst out.

Mrs. Shirley looked at her in mild surprise.

Jen began to rock with laughter, and Mary hastily rescued her glass and put it down safely on the table. "Confess, Joy! Tell them all about it!"

"Auntie dear, that man! That Marchwood man from next door! I wish 'next door' was half a county away, instead of half a mile!"

"Joy, dear, what is the matter?" her aunt asked gently, while Jen giggled again.

"Well, you know the perfect gift that creature has for turning up when he isn't wanted, and especially if I'm doing something slightly unusual! You know how he walked into a club meeting here one day, when the girls were all dancing on the lawn, and how he stared because I'd got on a cap and this baby frock! And the first time was the worst of all; when we'd buried Madam alive in the crypt, and he turned up with Ann Watson to rescue us, and I was dancing about in a gym tunic at one o'clock in the afternoon!"

"That could hardly be called his fault," Mrs. Shirley pointed out mildly.

"But he needn't have come just at that moment! Then to-day! There wasn't any need for him, of all people, to come along!"

"What happened, Joy?" Mrs. Shirley's voice was anxious, with a note in it which could not be ignored.

"As usual, he saw more than he was meant to, that's all! We brought our cripples out this way; we nearly got them here, in fact, but it looked like rain, so we turned back. But we were up on the hills behind here, when that Jenny-Wren—it's all her fault!—insisted on going into a dirty little shop at a crossroads to buy bulls'-eyes for the kiddies. And she came out giggling because she'd found two long clay pipes, just the thing for 'Bacca Pipes.' Of *course* she bought them, and of *course* I had to try them then and there, out in the road, to the great joy of the cripples, who simply shrieked with excitement! Of *course* Jenny-Wren had her pipe in her pocket, and stood there whistling like a schoolboy; and of *course* that man and his mother had to come driving past, in the mighty carriage with the fat old horses and the still fatter coachman! And there was I, out on the high road, with my heavy coat off and no hat on my head, doing a beautiful 'Heel-and-toe' over two clay pipes, to an audience of London slum children, all hanging out of the car and cheering like lunatics! Can't you just see the picture?" she appealed to Mary.

"I can just see that poor old lady's face!" and Jen went off into a peal of laughter again. "She always did think you were a disgrace to the neighbourhood, Joy Shirley, ever since she saw your legs as you raced across the garth in your tunic after me and Madam! You've only confirmed the idea, that's all! And you smashed my pipes to atoms!"

"Of course I did. I came bang down on them in my annoyance. I wished it was the Marchwood gang I was jumping on, too!"

"Joy, dear, it is time you tried to be a little more restrained," Mrs. Shirley looked annoyed, too. "Will you never give up these wild ways of yours?"

"'Fraid not, Auntie! I'm afraid when I do I'll be somebody else, not me myself." Joy kissed her consolingly. "You don't want me to be all different, do you, dear?"

"No, just a little different now and then!" Mrs. Shirley laughed ruefully.

"Come along to bed, dear! Never mind about those silly people! I don't care a scrap, but I knew you'd be annoyed. Don't you think it was honest and noble of me to confess?"

"You were afraid I'd give you away!" Jen laughed. "If they liked you, Joy, it might matter, for you'd be sorry to spoil their good opinion of you. But I'm quite certain sure they don't!"

"So much the better! I assure you I don't like them!" Joy said haughtily.

“Oh, but you’ve got to be friends with them, because you want to go boating on their lake!” Jen teased.

“Um!” said Joy thoughtfully. “There is that about it, of course! The only pond for miles round, Mary-Dorothy, and it belongs to an aged lady and a sulky man! And I love boating! Isn’t it a waste?”

“Hard lines!” Mary said, sympathetically. “You’ll have to remove that bad impression somehow.”

“I seem fated to deepen it!” Joy said sadly.

CHAPTER XIX

MARY-DOROTHY'S CONFESSION

"You've done every kind thing you can think of!" Mary said, with deep feeling, as she walked through the spring woods with Joy and Jen. "Will you add one more thing, before we go away?"

Biddy was on in front with Rosamund and Maidlin. It was Saturday, and by rights the visitors should have gone home at the end of their fortnight on Thursday. But Jen had explained that she could not allow that, as she had had to be away for two days out of each week, so that the weeks could not count as real ones; and Joy had warmly begged them to stay on. At Mary's explanation that she must really be back at the office on Monday morning and that Biddy must not miss any more classes, Joy had amended her invitation to bring it within practical bounds.

"Till Sunday, then! I'll run you up to town on Sunday evening; then the children can have Saturday together. It would be brutal to tear Biddy away from Rosamund on Friday!"

"Take me home, too!" Jen said sadly. "My daddy and my mummy want me! They say I've been away long enough. Won't you miss us all, 'Travellers' Joy?"

"We shall sit in sackcloth and ashes, and water the lawn with our tears!" Joy promised. "And the house will feel like a deserted mansion."

Both she and Jen turned quickly as Mary made her request, in the woods on Saturday morning. Jen eyed Mary curiously. Joy said quickly: "Of course I will! If it's anything I can do?"

"Is it something very difficult, Mary-Dorothy?" Jen asked curiously.

"I don't think so," Mary flushed. "I want to tell you something; to confess! I shall feel uneasy and unhappy if I leave here without telling you—though I never thought I should tell any one! But something's making me feel I must tell you. I wondered if perhaps you'd be willing to listen some time—after Biddy and the others have gone to bed."

She coloured again under their astonished eyes, and was obviously nervous.

Jen burst out: "*If* we'll listen! We're simply dying to know what you're talking about!"

"But what can you possibly have to confess?" Joy stared at her in puzzled amazement.

But Mary would not start on her story then. They had to wait, in keen anticipation, till all was quiet upstairs that night, and even Mrs. Shirley had gone to bed. No more had been said, but Mary knew by the sparkle in Jen's eyes, and the meaning look in Joy's, that they were waiting eagerly for the time to come. She had repented of her resolve more than once during the day; but it had been no impulse that had driven her to speak, but a decision only come to gradually and surely; and she knew she could not have been content to leave Joy's house without unburdening her mind. It had to be done; but she was nervous and felt that an ordeal lay before her.

"Now!" Jen turned to her, in a whirl of suppressed excitement. "Shall we stop here in the moonlight? Or go into the Abbey? Or go up to Joy's room and sit on her bed with our hair down, in our nighties?"

Joy glanced at Mary's restless face, and realised that here was something serious, and that it was no time for light talk and laughter.

"Bring cushions, and we'll go into the cloisters," she said abruptly. "We don't want to be interrupted. If those kids upstairs find we haven't come to bed, they're sure to think of midnight feasts or raids on bedrooms. We don't want ragging to-night. I'll get the keys. The Abbey's the place for confessions, though what a quiet mousy person like Mary-Dorothy can have to confess beats me! But if she wants to confess, she shall. And she shan't be interrupted, or ragged about it, either. But take cushions, or you'll have to stand up all the time. You can't sit on the stone."

Armed with cushions and keys, they invaded the Abbey, Jen and Joy reminded irresistibly of the night of Joan's moonlight dance. The cushions made safe seats of the broad stone ledges of the windows; and Mary, while she spoke, gazed across at the beautiful arches of the chapter-house, while Joy and Jen gazed at her, and sometimes glanced quickly at one another.

"Now, Mary-Dorothy, tell us the secret!" Jen begged.

"It is a secret, and I thought it always would be," Mary began nervously, but soon forgot herself in the deep earnestness with which she spoke. "I want you to know how big a thing you've done for me, before we go away. I'm sure you've done a great deal for Biddy, too; I believe she'll be quite different after this fortnight. Perhaps all her life will be changed, and it will be for the better. But you've done more for me than for Biddy, because I needed it more. No one knows how much I needed it; I hardly knew myself. I was quite happy, except just now and then when I had spasms of conscience. But mostly I managed to stifle them; and they didn't trouble me very deeply. But all the time, for years, I've been missing the real things of life; and I'd have gone on so for ever, I believe, if you two hadn't come along and simply hauled me out of the life I was leading."

Joy looked at Jen, and Jen at Joy. Then Jen gasped: "But how? How do you mean? We didn't know!"

"What kind of life were you leading?" Joy asked, slowly pondering this point. "Mary-Dorothy, if you'll forgive my saying it—and we came here to be quite frank about things!—there's always been something about you we couldn't understand. Are you going to tell us what it is?"

"Oh, go on, Mary-Dorothy, dear!" Jen begged excitedly.

"It isn't anything thrilling," Mary said sombrely. "But I'm ashamed of it. I don't want Biddy to know. I can only tell you two because you've lifted me right out of it, and I'm so very grateful. I could never have got free by myself; I'd given up trying. You did it unconsciously, I know. But I'm none the less grateful. Shall I tell you just how it happened? Tell me if you get bored!"

"Bored? We're thrilled!" Jen assured her.

"As a child," said Mary gravely, "I always made up stories. I tried to write them down, and one day, with a great effort, I showed them to my father. I told you he was a journalist. It was the night before he left for China as special correspondent. Of course I had meant to ask his opinion about my stuff sometime, but it was rather an effort for me, and I'd been putting off the ordeal of showing him my work. But I couldn't bear to let him go and feel I'd had a secret from him. So I showed him some of the fancies I'd written down. And of course he knew what was good and what was bad. He found a lot of nice things to say; the writing and the descriptions were good, but none of it was the kind of thing I could ever hope to sell. He said when he came back he would help me to write in earnest; and he told me to study in the meantime, and if I tried again, to be more practical and to write of everyday things that I knew. I'm sure it was wise advice; my fairy tales weren't the kind of thing any one else would

want to read. But I waited for him to come back and tell me more; and he never came. He was taken ill out there, and died before he got proper medical skill. Well, you see what that meant!" swiftly, to prevent any words of sympathy. "I had to work. I'd learnt to type for him. I got into an office, and was thankful for the chance. There was Mother, at that time; and Biddy was still at school. I had no time to think of writing, and no one to help me later on, when I had more time. I didn't know how to go on. I burnt all my papers;—oh, none of them were any good——!"

"Mary-Dorothy, how could you?" Jen cried indignantly, with the optimism of her age. "Why, some of them may have been priceless manuscripts!"

But Joy, with a gift of original work which yet, she knew in her heart, fell short of greatness, came nearer to understanding. "But did you never try again?" she asked gently. "Of course, one makes heaps of false starts. You expect lots of your early work to be useless. But it generally has something in it to show the real thing is there. Did you give up hope and never try again, Mary-Dorothy?"

"That's where I failed. I lost heart, and hadn't the courage to go on. It seemed so useless. So I—I kept the stories for myself," Mary said slowly, picking her words with care and trying to make the girls understand. "I went on making up romances, but nobody knew. They were real to me; I lived in them, but it was an unreal world. There was nothing bad in them; on the contrary, I put in all the good and beautiful and uplifting things that I seemed to be missing in real life. I dreamt about them; I lived among these people I'd invented, and loved them, and knew them. And it went on for years and years, till the inside life was almost as real as the outer one, and much more fascinating. I was always happy when I was dreaming. When I was really awake, things were often worrying; but I could always escape into the other life, and nothing ever worried there."

She paused, her eyes searching their faces wistfully to see if they understood, if they would sympathise or condemn.

Jen looked frankly puzzled. This was a thing unlike anything she had ever met.

Joy's face was troubled; she was older and had a little more experience of life to help her judgment.

"I never heard of any one doing it before," she said slowly, "but it seems to me it couldn't be quite right, Mary-Dorothy. It's unnatural, to begin with; not normal. That means it must be wrong. Didn't it unfit you for ordinary life? Didn't it make you—well, dreamy and half-awake?"

"That's what we said about her when we first got to know her!" Jen exclaimed triumphantly. "But I thought it was only because we didn't know her very well. Now that we know her so much better she seems quite different; much more alive!"

"No, you were right. I am different," Mary said swiftly. "That was the result; I'd come to live more in my secret world than in the real one. It was unfitting me for real life most horribly. Of course it was abnormal and wrong; I knew it, in the back of my mind, but I wouldn't admit it. I learned to stifle my conscience. I see now that I was terribly to blame; but it had got too strong for me. I really believe I couldn't break away from it lately; at first, of course, I could and ought to have done. But I didn't realise what it was doing to me; how serious its results would be; until, just lately, I found that I couldn't cope with Biddy, couldn't control her, couldn't satisfy her. I realised I had failed with her; and in my heart I knew the reason, and that this was the result, or the punishment, if you like, of the way I'd lived for years. I'd always escaped from real difficulties into a dream-world; when the difficulties

became problems that threatened to ruin our home-life and Biddy's future, I was only fit for dreams and absolutely helpless before realities. That's the dreadful trouble I was in when Jen walked into the office one day and gave me violets."

"Oh, I'm glad I came!" Jen said pitifully. "But I didn't know, Mary-Dorothy. You looked tired, that was all. It was when I saw you sitting at home darning Biddy's stockings that I began to be sorry, and to wonder if I couldn't make you go out too."

"It was beautiful of you to care. But actually I was very happy that first time you came. Your violets had cheered me up; and I was dreaming quite contentedly. The next time, when Joy came, too, and you piped to me, was another matter. I'd discovered how helpless I was to keep Biddy back from harm, and how I'd failed to make her care for me or home, and I was nearly heartbroken; you saved me from a desperately miserable evening by carrying me off to those classes. But I'd deserved to be unhappy. I'd made my own trouble. Now I want to tell you what has happened since then. I'd tried and tried to give up those dreams and stories, you understand; but I'd always slipped back, till at last I had given up trying. It was just like taking drink, or a drug. I couldn't live without it, I thought. I often used to think—when I thought about it at all—that I could never say things about drunkards, though I might be very sorry for them; for I was just as bad myself."

"Oh, you weren't! Mary-Dorothy, what rot!" Jen cried explosively.

"Won't you tell us what happened?" Joy asked anxiously; her face was still much troubled.

"You and Jen came into our lives. You brought music and movement, poetry that we could see, when you let us watch folk-dances; exercise, when you made us join in them ourselves. You gave us new interests of every kind. Then you brought us here; but it had begun to happen before we came here. It was more those happy, jolly, healthy evenings in town that cured me than this time in the country, though it has all helped."

"Cured you?" There was an eager note in Joy's voice. She had been waiting anxiously for this.

"It all began to slip away from me; all that unhealthiness. I can't tell when it began. I only realised after awhile that it was happening; that I was thinking more of other things and dreaming less. I used to go over the dances; and the music went on and on inside me. I couldn't make up stories to folk-dance tunes! And I had the strangest feeling, right from the first; and I still have it, more strongly than ever; a feeling of guilt when I came near any of you, as if I'd been indulging in secret things. You were all so healthy and normal, all of you and all your friends, even to your Pixie and your Madam, that I felt I'd been guilty of treason if I did unhealthy abnormal things, even though you never knew. I suddenly got ashamed of what I'd been doing. But I did less and less of it. You had filled me with such new thoughts and ideas that I simply hadn't time for dreams. That was what it came to; you had given me real things, real happiness, real art and music and beauty, and the rest seemed waste of time. And quite without any trying on my part, I've got what I've needed for years—freedom from those things that were drugging me and spoiling my life. You've made me live again."

"Oh, I'm glad!" Joy's voice had a deep note of strong feeling in it. "Of course we didn't know. It was unconscious; it's no credit to us; but we can be glad!"

"Oh, but it is something to thank you for!" Mary said swiftly. "It's because you are what you are that you were able to save me! How many girls would have taken an interest in me, as Jen did? How many would have taken trouble over me? How many would have asked me to their homes, as you did? You couldn't know how badly I needed your help, but you knew you

were helping me. You set out to do it. You meant to be kind. I thank you with all my heart. I shall always remember that you saved me.”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Jen began. “It’s different from any story I ever heard. But I am glad I came into your office that day, Mary-Dorothy!”

“It couldn’t be right,” Joy summed up her reflections on the matter. “I don’t know anything about it, either, but I’m sure it wasn’t right. It couldn’t be healthy. You won’t ever do it again, Mary-Dorothy?” her voice had a stern note which was not all a joke.

“It seems to me rather like secret drinking,” Jen remarked. “You’d better sign the pledge, Mary-Dorothy!”

Mary flushed. “I’ll never make any promise,” she said, in a low tone, “simply because I know the strength of the thing and the power it has over me, and I know how soft I am. But I don’t believe I shall ever go back to it badly, or for long at a time.”

Jen leaned forward. “Wouldn’t you promise, if I asked you to?”

“I’d ask you not to ask me,” Mary said restlessly. “I’ve promised a dozen times, to myself, and broken my word every time. It’s no use, Jenny-Wren. I’ll try; I’ll try very hard. But that’s the most I’ll promise.”

“But you’d never break your word to *me*!” Jen coaxed.

Mary shook her head and looked away from her across the moonlit garth. “I’d never give it. I don’t trust myself. And I—I like you too much. If I broke my word to you, it would always lie between us, and our friendship would be ruined. I daren’t risk it. But I’ll think of you every time I’m tempted, and that may save me. It’s more likely to do it than any promise. I know you two would think me a slacker if I went back now. I’ll try to avoid that.”

“You can’t disappoint us; you simply can’t,” Joy said bluntly. “You said you felt guilty, before. Well, I hope you’d feel ten times more guilty now. It would be undoing everything you say we’ve done for you. You couldn’t!”

“I should hate myself if I did,” Mary said in a low voice. “But you don’t know; you can hardly understand; it was for years and years. I’m just afraid, when I get used to all the new thoughts you’ve given me, that they may lose their power to hold me back; and then I may drift into those ways again. I daren’t promise.”

“Oh, but there will be other new things!” Jen was privately resolving that there should be plenty of these. “There are always new things, as long as you’re alive! There are new dances, and new tunes, and new friends. You’re not likely to get to the end of any of those for some years!”

“As for friends,” said Joy, with one of her sudden changes of subject, which, Jen had learned, meant that no more was to be said at the moment, but that the matter would be discussed in private later, “don’t our three children get on well together? Biddy will have to see Rosamund sometimes; we can’t part them entirely.”

“It’s not only Rosamund,” Mary remarked.

Joy laughed. “Have you seen that? There’s been a jolly little comedy going on between those three. But I didn’t know you’d noticed it.”

“Oh, I’ve been watching! But I didn’t know you had. Biddy told me the first evening that she liked Rosamund and meant to chum with her. But, to be perfectly honest, she said more than that,” Mary confessed.

“I know,” Joy agreed. “I’ve seen it happening. She thinks Rosamund’s an heiress and it would be good business to be her friend.”

“Oh!” said Jen swiftly. “Do you think so? That’s rather horrid of Biddy!”

"Only practical. She's a very businesslike little person. I thought her rather horrid at first, but I've forgiven her now," Joy remarked.

Mary looked up quickly. "She hasn't said it again to me. She saw I didn't like it. I think she's forgotten all about it."

"Oh, no, she hasn't forgotten!" Joy assured her. "She and Rosamund are always making plans for the future, which won't come off, for Rosamunda will go abroad with her parents presently."

"But Biddy seems very fond of Maidlin too," Jen suggested.

"She's taken it into her head to be sorry for Maidlin, because she's an orphan and not an heiress," Mary remarked. "She's a silly child, of course. It's unnecessary. Maidlin's very happy, and finds everything she could want in Joy. Anyone can see that. But Biddy's romantic and very young; she talks about 'Poor Maidie,' and wonders what she'll do later on; and asks if she's going to be trained to go into business, and is afraid she won't get on very well, and so on. The favourite idea is that Biddy and Rosamund will go into business together; and the latest is that they'll 'let poor Maidie in too,' as Biddy puts it."

Jen, leaning back in her window-corner, clasped her knees and rocked with laughter. Joy laughed a little also, but then said sympathetically:

"I know. I've seen it happening. Biddy's business instincts have been conquered by her real liking for Maidie, and she means to help her and stand by her, though she sees no way of getting anything out of it. It won't pay her and Rosamund to have Maidlin tacked on to their business schemes, but they 'can't leave the poor kid out;' that's how Biddy put it to Rosamund. So they're going to take her in, even if she's a drag on them. I'm ever so pleased about it."

Jen chuckled, and hugged her knees, and gazed at Mary.

Mary said slowly, looking puzzled: "But you said all those plans couldn't come to anything?"

"Oh, I don't mean I'm pleased about the future! I'll take care of Maidlin's future! I made that my business when I adopted her. No, I'm pleased about Biddy. About the way her decent sporting side has grown while she's been here, so that she can't think only of what will pay, but must do the right thing by a younger girl, and is ready to stand by her and see her through, even if it interferes with her own plans. That's what it comes to. Biddy can't ignore Maidlin, though she's only the caretaker's niece, with no prospects but what I may happen to do for her! Biddy's honestly fond of Maidlin, and so she won't leave her behind. I've been watching the struggle between the business Biddy and the real one, and the real one has won through. It's rather topping! I wanted to cheer this evening, when Rosamund told me that Biddy had suggested they should include Maidie in their future plans."

"It's jolly decent of her!" Jen said warmly. "I've been away too much to see it as you've done. But I saw they were all three getting chummier and chummier. There'll be tears to-morrow night!"

"Oh, they're too big to weep! But Ros will be grumpy, and Maidie will go into her shell and be silent for hours. I'm glad Biddy has been conquered! If she'd stuck to her principles, and hung on to Rosamund and had no time to spare for Maidlin because she thinks Maidie's of no consequence, I'd have felt really bad, really disappointed, when she has to go to-morrow. But as the sporting Biddy has come out on top, all's well!"

"I'm glad, too," Mary said, with deep feeling. "I was troubled about Biddy's extreme business tendency! If you have forced her to go against it, you've done a big thing for her. It

was a part of Bidly I didn't like."

"I didn't do it. Perhaps I helped a little, though," and Joy's eyes met Jen's. "Maidie did it. She made Bidly like her, somehow or other; and Bidly's better self did the rest."

"You seem to have called the best self of each of us into life," Mary said, in a low voice.

Joy's practical side rose to the occasion. She was always inclined to repel spoken gratitude and always shrank from any approach to sentiment, though a matter-of-fact straightforward story, like Mary's of that evening, could move her deeply. "Do you know it's nearly midnight? Come to bed, my children! The kids will have been asleep for hours!"

CHAPTER XX

JOY'S HEIRESS

"I doubt it!" Jen murmured, as they crossed the lawn. "The kids being asleep, I mean. After all, it's their last night together! Think of our own young days, Joy!" and she sighed her middle-aged sigh, and pointed to a faint glimmer of light from Rosamund's window.

"Candle!" Joy deduced. "Midnight feast! You won't find Biddy in her bed, Mary-Dorothy. Shall we go and row them, or shall we leave them to it?"

"Oh, Joy! You couldn't!" Jen's tone was shocked. "Let them have their fun! You know we'd have done it ourselves!"

"So long as they don't set the house on fire," Joy amended. "I will not have the Hall burnt down, even if it is Biddy's last night. Creep up like ghosts, then, and don't let them know we've been out. I hope Biddy won't disturb you when she comes to bed, Mary-Dorothy."

A note pinned to Mary's pillow saved her from the need to lie awake. It was brief, and scribbled in haste.

"DEAR OLD THING,—

"As it's our last night, I'm going to sleep heads and tails with Maidie, as she's smaller than Ros. We're going to have a midnight. Don't be a rotter and give us away to Joy and Jen, though I don't believe they'd mind. Won't it be awful not being here to-morrow night? I can't bear to go away, can you?

"Yours sadly,

"BRIDGET."

Mary put the note away to show to Joy in the morning, for the sake of those last sentences. If Joy had not been aware of the feast already, she would have felt it was only right to consult her, since they were guests in her house, though that point had not occurred to Biddy. But as Joy knew all about it, Mary did not tell her till the morning, but went to bed wondering if the "heads and tails" arrangement would be satisfactory.

In Rosamund's room, which opened out of Maidlin's, final schemes were being hatched by the three, sitting on her bed in their dressing-gowns, by the light of a single candle on the table.

"Well, I will, then," Rosamund agreed at last. "As it's our absolutely last chance. I don't really think Joy will mind, Maidie. Pass the lemonade, Biddums; thanks! I don't see why she should. Of course, it's trespassing, but we shan't do any harm, and it's only next door; and anyway, it belongs to that Marchwood man, and she doesn't like him."

"No, she only likes his pond!" Biddy remarked. "Ever since I heard there was a lake next door I've been dying to see it. It's the only thing this place wants; you've got woods and hills and views and fields and flowers and footpaths, and even ruins; but there's no water. If any man's got a lake big enough to boat on, he ought to throw it open to the public."

"Joy wants it for skating in the winter, too," Maidlin said. "Can I have an orange, Ros?"

"Here, catch! Have a biscuit with it. Joy and Joan used to go on the lake a lot, when the next-door place was empty; Jen told me so. But this wretched man's coming has stopped all that."

"Joy had better marry the pond; the man, I mean! The pond would be thrown in," Biddy suggested. "Why shouldn't she? Is he so very awful? She's pretty enough! He couldn't mind!"

"She's not going to marry anybody," Maidlin objected hurriedly.

"I don't know if he means to stay at home now," Rosamund said doubtfully. "He's a traveller, and rather famous, you know. Oh, he's a frightfully big chap! Important, and all that. He's been abroad for years, Jen says. But he's come home now to live with his old mother. I don't know how long he'll stay. If Joy married him just to get hold of his pond, and then he took her off to Africa or Patagonia or the South Pole or Thibet, she'd be rather sold, wouldn't she?"

"I'd like to see him!" Biddy wailed.

"You shall see his pond, anyway. We'll take you to-morrow afternoon. But don't tell the girls or your Mary, for we aren't supposed to go into his grounds."

"Couldn't we fall in, and yell till he had to come and rescue us? I want to see what he's like."

"Not worth it. You'd get beastly wet; and he's nothing to look at."

"He always looks cross," said Maidlin, helping herself to the chocolates they had provided that afternoon.

"May be only lonely or bored," Rosamund amended. "But he doesn't ever look frightfully nice or cheerful!"

Happily ignorant of the plans being made for her future, Joy slipped into Jen's room to brush her hair and talk.

Jen sat up in bed to listen. "I knew you'd come! Is it about Mary-Dorothy? Or Biddy? Aren't you going to tell them about Maidlin, Joy?"

"I may tell Mary-Dorothy the story before they go. I'm worried about her, Jenny-Wren."

"Oh? But she's heaps better, Joy."

"I'm more thankful for that than I can say. I like her, and so I'm simply awfully glad you found her when you did. But there was more wrong than she thinks. We've got to see that she never goes back to all that again," Joy was brushing and speaking vigorously. "I don't understand; I never heard of anything like it before—in a grown person. Of course, we all made up stories at school, and some of the girls used to get dreamy and sentimental. But she's too old for that. I'm sure it's something wrong. She's quite all right now, of course; but she wasn't when you found her, and she was making for something worse still. Have you had time to think how it would have ended, if she'd gone on like that, living half the time in another world, inside her mind?"

Jen gazed at her wide-eyed. "Do you mean it would have affected her brain? You can't mean that, Joy! Just making up stories?"

"I believe she'd have had a bad nervous breakdown. Don't you see how unhealthy it was? Seems to me she was living on her nerves and her imagination. It couldn't be right. I don't know where she'd have landed herself, but it's somewhere she's never going to get if I can help it. She'd have gone on getting more and more out of touch with real life and real things, and more and more buried in her dreams, till something would have had to crash somewhere. An abnormal, unnatural thing like that couldn't go on without something giving way. You jumped into the middle of things and saved her, and I've helped. But now—now that she's trusted us and we know the danger she was in better than she does herself—it's up to us to hang on to her and see that she never goes back."

"Yes, oh, yes!" Jen said pitifully. "We could never let her down now!"

"We're the only ones who know. It's a big job for us, but we can't shirk it," Joy said decisively, as she plaited her hair. "She's come in our way, and she needs us as much as if she'd been starving on the streets. I was frightened while she was telling us to-night, and most of all because she didn't seem to realise the seriousness of it. She wasn't frightened herself. She didn't know she'd been in any danger. She feels she was wasting her life, and being no use to Biddy; but she doesn't see what she was making for. I don't know anything about it, but I'm sure she couldn't have gone on safely. Something would have got worn out, or would have given way. It isn't going to happen if I can help it."

"But what can we do?" Jen pleaded. "I shall be in town, of course, and I'll see her at classes. I can keep an eye on her between times, too."

"See that she keeps on coming to classes. The music and exercise have evidently helped her. But there's one thing I'm going to do next time I'm in town," and Joy flung back the thick braids of hair and spoke decidedly. "I'm going to talk it over with the Pixie, and get her advice. She may have met the same kind of thing before."

"Cheers! I'll come, too! We must ask somebody, Joy."

"Yes, it's too difficult for us alone. I know Mary-Dorothy meant it to be a secret, and I won't tell another soul, but I do mean to consult the Pixie. I've an idea in my head, but I want her advice about it first."

Jen looked up quickly, but did not question her. "Oh, well, you'll tell me when it's ripe! We'll go and see the Pixie at her shop, shall we? That will make an excuse."

"I'd forgotten the shop. Yes, I'll go and order my hand-woven frock. Then we'll take the Little One out to lunch, and talk over this other business."

"Come into the Abbey for the last time, Mary-Dorothy!" Joy commanded, after lunch next day. "Of course, I don't mean really the last time! I hope you'll soon come here again. But if you really must go up to town after tea, we'll have a last walk in the Abbey. The children are out somewhere, also for a last walk, I suppose!"

"Did you see the innocent faces at breakfast-time?" Jen laughed, as they entered the cloisters. "What time did Biddy come to bed, Mary-Dorothy?"

"She never came at all. She left a note on my pillow, saying she was going to sleep at the bottom of Maidlin's bed, as they were going to have a feast," and Mary handed the note to Joy. "I knew you wouldn't mind. You'll see what she says about going home to-day."

Joy's only comment on the re-arrangement of the sleeping plans for the night was, "It's very good for Maidie. She's getting less shy every day. Biddy's done her good. Don't you think so, Jen? She's forgetting she wasn't brought up as Rosamund was. It weighed on her fearfully at first," she said to Mary. "She'd lived on a Cumberland farm, and she felt utterly at sea with us. As she said, she had never seen any people like us before! But she's changing every day. In three months she'll have forgotten the other life. Living with Rosamund and Biddy is even more of a help to her than school. I expect she's still a shy, silent mouse at school. But here she is learning to be just one of ourselves, and that's what we want. It's quite a responsibility training Ann Watson's niece to be mistress of an Italian fortune, isn't it, Mary-Dorothy?"

Her eyes, full of laughter, met Mary's startled ones. "Maidlin?" Mary said incredulously. "But surely—but we thought Rosamund—but Biddy said——"

"Biddy doesn't know anything about it. I told Rosamund not to babble. Maidlin's the heiress. She'll have a big fortune, and estates in Italy, when she comes of age."

Mary looked at her helplessly. "But she's the caretaker's niece!"

“Oh, of course there’s a story behind! We call her the girl out of the novelette. Her father only died two months ago; but she hadn’t seen him for several years. I wouldn’t let her wear black for him; she loves colours, and it seemed too silly to stop her wearing them when she really hadn’t known him. She wanted to wear mourning, of course; she was fearfully shocked at me, and so was Ann. But I told her children very often didn’t wear black nowadays, and I’d very much rather she didn’t, and she gave in, though I know she and Ann thought me very funny! Perhaps you’d better tell Biddy when you get home. It’s hardly fair to go on cheating her, and they’re all such good friends now that nothing will matter. But I didn’t want Biddy to know during her visit. I wanted to see what would happen. That’s the little comedy I’ve been watching, Mary-Dorothy! Not merely Biddy being conquered by her better self; but Biddy being very nice and kind to my heiress out of sheer goodness of heart and because she was sorry for her. Very much jollier than if she’d known, and had chummed with Maidie because of her fortune!”

“Oh, yes!” Mary said fervently. “I’m glad we didn’t know!”

“You’d better hear the story. Then you can tell Biddy how it happened. You see, Maidlin came——”

A wild shriek cut through the still air; and a second later another, full of terror.

Suddenly white-faced, Joy said breathlessly, “It’s those girls! Where can they be? Somewhere near! Jen, where are they?”

“In the tunnels?” gasped Jen, and darted towards the chapter-house.

“No, come back! It wasn’t underground. It was over there, in the Marchwood grounds. The lake, Jen!” and Joy was off, racing back to the garden of the Hall, Jen at her heels, Mary following, but far behind.

CHAPTER XXI

THE POND NEXT DOOR

"Oh, this is topping!" Biddy cried exuberantly, and raced across the grass to the water.

As a lake, it was all that could be desired. It stretched away among the trees, reflecting pines and hawthorn; but at the lower end, where the girls had come upon it, there were open grass banks, and beds of rushes, and a low islet in the middle, covered with flowering thorn bushes round one big oak tree.

As a crowning joy, a small boat lay on the nearer bank. Biddy whirled down upon it in a wild joyous rush, and had it in the water by the time Rosamund and Maidlin caught her.

"We simply must see the island! Oh, it won't do any harm, Ros! I believe the boat's left here on purpose. Even the oars are here! Come on!"

Rosamund wanted to see the island badly, and there was no one in sight. She took one oar and Biddy the other, and if their rowing was unscientific it was at least effective. They all landed on the island, and made a thorough exploration.

"I'll stay here, and build a Robinson Crusoe hut!" Biddy giggled delightedly. "You'll bring me food! Then I can't go back to town!"

Sitting perched rather dangerously on a long arm of the oak tree, hanging out well over the water, they talked and made plans for future meetings. Maidlin, the last in most adventures, proved herself an adept at tree-climbing, and fearlessly crept farther along the bough than either of the others would have ventured.

They were talking eagerly of the future, when Biddy's jaw dropped and she pointed in speechless dismay at a man who had appeared on the bank farther down the lake.

"It's him!" gasped Rosamund. "I say, now we're in for a row!"

"Who? What?" Maidlin twisted round in alarm.

Then her wild shriek rang out, as she lost her balance and fell, striking her head on a lower branch as she plunged into the water.

With a scream, "Maidie! Oh, Maidie!" Rosamund hurled herself to the rescue, hanging by her hands for a second and then dropping with a splash.

In a flash, quick-witted Biddy saw two things: if Rosamund could swim, she could save Maidlin; if she could not, she would need to be saved herself, and she could be helped more successfully from the boat than by another girl also floundering in deep water. So Biddy went along the bough and down the trunk like a squirrel; but, in her breathless haste, caught her foot in a streamer of ivy and fell the last two yards, giving a nasty twist to the entangled foot.

Bruised and shaken, she wrenched herself free, and a sob broke from her as a sharp pain stabbed the foot. She could not stand on it.

"But I *must*!" she gasped desperately, and with a frantic effort dragged herself to the boat and rolled into it.

A fierce thrust of the oar against the bank sent the boat leaping towards Rosamund, who had thought she could swim but was only managing to keep herself afloat, badly hampered by her Sunday frock. Maidlin was nowhere to be seen.

Biddy, shaking with fright, leaned over and called frantically. "Ros, hold on to me! You'll go down! Where's Maidie? Oh, why doesn't she come up again?"

She was holding out her hand to struggling Rosamund and seriously endangering the balance of the boat, when a hand gripped the other side, steadying it and jerking her backwards, and a stern voice said sharply:

“Sit down! You’ll upset the boat. Give me an oar; now sit still and leave it to me.”

A wild thought flashed through Biddy’s distraught mind, of the midnight feast and her own desire to be rescued by the unknown owner of the lake. She had not seen him racing down the bank or plunging in at the nearest point; but here he was, thrusting an oar towards Rosamund. Then he disappeared, diving in search of the child in the pink frock who had been the first to fall.

“Oh, there she is!” shrieked Biddy, as Maidlin’s black head appeared. “Oh, why doesn’t he come? She’ll go under again! Oh!” she gasped. “She’s dead; I’m sure she’s dead! She isn’t moving!”

Maidlin was indeed lying alarmingly still. Rosamund was pushing towards her with her oar when the diver reappeared, saw the small dark head, and plunged towards her.

“He’s got her!” Biddy cried shrilly. “Oh, cheers! He’s got her all right!”

“But what if it’s too late?” Rosamund moaned, and reached out to the boat again and hung there panting. “She wasn’t trying to swim. Drowning people always struggle till it’s too late. Oh, why did we come? Oh, where’s Joy? What will she say?”

The man was swimming to the bank; one glance at Maidlin had told him there was no time to spare, and the other two were safe enough if they kept still.

Rosamund, sure that Maidlin was dead, hung on to the boat, crying helplessly in the reaction after the moment of strain. Biddy’s first impulsive move to help her into the boat had told her what would happen if she persisted, and the stern words had come back—“Sit still and leave it to me.” Their tone, and the fear of obvious consequences, compelled obedience; she instinctively threw her weight to the other side to balance Rosamund, and leaned back, her face white with terror and pain, her injured foot clasped tightly in both hands.

“Maidie wasn’t long in the water, Ros!” she whispered imploringly. “I don’t believe she could be drowned in that little while! He’ll do things to her and bring her round.”

“If she’s dead, Joy will never forgive us,” and Rosamund shook and sobbed again.

“He’s looking at her on the bank,” Biddy whispered. “He’s putting her face downwards. He’s coming back for us.”

“Oh, why does he waste time over us?” Rosamund cried indignantly. “He knows we’re safe. Yell to him, Biddy!”

“But we can go and fetch the doctor.” Biddy was quicker to see that their help might be needed. “He can’t do everything. Do what he says, Ros, and don’t tease him. He knows.”

A strong push of Andrew Marchwood’s arm sent the little boat towards the island again, just far enough for him to climb ashore and jump in. Rosamund and the oar were lifted aboard, and he put her and Biddy quickly into the stern and took the oars.

The girls submitted in frightened silence. But one question had to be asked.

Rosamund summoned up all her courage and faltered, “Please tell us! Is Maidie dead?”

He saw the terror in their eyes, and said in abrupt reassurance, “Certainly not. But she has had a blow on the head. I’ll see to her now. You must go and tell Miss Shirley.”

The girls looked at one another. Then Biddy said brokenly, “You’ll have to go, Ros. I feel an awful beast; I ought to back you up. But I caught my foot in a creeper-thing on that tree, and I can’t walk.”

Their rescuer glanced at her white face and her hands clasping her ankle, and his lips tightened in annoyance. "I can't see to that now. The other child matters more. Tie it up tightly and sit still in the boat. Are you all right?" sharply, to Rosamund.

"Yes. I'll go and tell Joy," Rosamund said bravely. "We oughtn't to have come. It was my fault."

"Oh, no, it was mine! I teased—oh, Ros! Here come Joy and Jen! How did they know?"

Joy was the first to reach the bank, to find her neighbour bending over Maidlin, "doing things," as Biddy had said; for his first look at her when he returned from the island had not been reassuring. She was more nearly drowned than he had thought. He said nothing to the anxious girls, but began to rub her limbs; then called sharply to Rosamund.

"Come here! You can do this. Rub her, so, steadily," and he began to raise and lower her arms.

Rosamund gave him a scared look, and, half crying, followed his instructions. There was a big bruise on Maidlin's forehead, and she was horribly still, and such a queer colour that Rosamund's heart almost stopped as she looked at her. Shaking with fear and cold, and sobbing under her breath, she rubbed steadily and carefully. The man glanced at her, but could not stop on her account. She was running a risk of deadly chill, but Maidlin's life was nearly gone.

As Joy raced up, he spoke without stopping in his task. "The doctor, Miss Shirley, at once. 'Phone him first, and then go for him on your cycle. And tell them at the house——"

"I know!" Joy said, breathless, but quiet, and keeping her head; one glance at Maidlin had shown the urgency of the situation, but also that it was in the hands of one who knew. She had confidence in this man from that moment. "Hot bottles and blankets, and hot drinks and brandy. I'll see to all that."

"Take this child with you. She'll have a chill. The other girl can take her place."

"Jen!" Joy called sharply, and Jen sprang to her side. "Take Rosamund's place here. We can't have her ill too. Come, Rosamund!"

Jen slipped into the place, and Rosamund, not daring to protest, raced away after Joy, but was soon left far behind, for her wet clothes were heavy, and Joy, in cold terror, went like the wind, as she had come, Maidlin's gray face always before her eyes. They passed Mary, but did not stop; only Joy cried, as she sped past her, "Go on! You may be able to help!"

As Mary reached the bank, Andrew Marchwood paused in his task and looked down at Jen. "This is Miss Shirley's Italian heiress, of whom we have heard?"

Jen raised her frightened, tear-filled eyes. "Yes. Joy's wrapped up in Maidie. Can you save her?"

"Then run after her and tell her there is hope. The child isn't going to die. Her heart's working again. We want the doctor at the earliest possible moment, however. There's some concussion, and very severe shock. She'd better tell him that. But the child's breathing. I'll bring her along presently. See that everything is ready. Your friend can help me here."

"Tell me what to do," Mary faltered. "I want to help."

As Jen sped after Joy, the man glanced at his new assistant, and swiftly gave her directions which Jen had never needed. This girl was older than the other two, but far less capable, and had far less command of her nerves. The others, Joy and Jen, though in terror for Maidlin, had kept quiet, had asked no questions, had risen to the occasion and had kept their heads in a way that he could only respect. This girl was trembling all over, and her hands had no real strength to rub life into Maidlin's limbs. He remembered the steady vigour of Jen's hands; though she

had been crying quietly all the time, it had not interfered with the efficiency of her help. He summed up Mary mentally, with a brief, “Nervy. No use. Going all to pieces. The other two had twice her grit. But luckily the danger’s over.”

Jen, with an inspiration, ran straight to the gates of the Marchwood estate, which Joy must pass on her way to reach the doctor; and Andrew Marchwood laughed grimly as he realised her intention. “She’ll catch Miss Shirley there, if she’s started. Might have missed her at the Hall. Good child! Her head’s on straight. She’s the blue girl who dances jigs, isn’t she?” to Mary.

This, excusably, was too much for Mary, who had never heard of the incident to which he referred. She faltered, “I don’t know! I—I suppose so!”

He gave a grunt of disapproval, and picked Maidlin up in his arms. “Tell that child in the boat I’ll come back for her,” and he set off towards the Hall.

“Biddy, what’s the matter? Why don’t you get out? Oh, are you hurt? What happened?” Mary cried, all in one breath.

But Biddy had forgotten her foot—until she tried to move it. “Mary! Did you hear what he said? And Jen said yes! He said Maidie was an heiress, an Italian heiress! And Jen said yes!”

“I know. It’s true, Biddy. We made a mistake. Joy had just been telling me when we heard you scream.”

“But the caretaker’s her aunt!” Biddy protested.

“I haven’t heard the story yet. Joy was going to tell me. But Maidlin is the heiress, Biddy.”

“My hat!” said Biddy fervently. “Isn’t that weird? I *say*! Suppose we’d drowned her?”

“Have you hurt your foot?” Mary asked again.

“And I’ve been talking about ‘poor Maidie’ for a fortnight! I guess I’ve been making a silly of myself!” Biddy said ruefully.

Out in the road Jen stood waving her arms wildly, as Joy came racing round the corner from the Hall. Her motor-cycle was temporarily out of action, but the little car had been ready for the evening run to town.

She pulled up just in time to avoid running over Jen, “What’s the matter, idiot? Why did you stop me? Oh, Jenny-Wren, your face says it’s good news! Is that why you’re being a Jumping-Jack?”

“He sent me to tell you. She’s breathing, so she won’t die. You’re to tell the doctor there’s concussion and severe shock, but she isn’t going to die. He sent me after you, the minute he knew.”

“Oh, the blessed man!” Joy said fervently. “I think I’d have died before I got to the doc. if I’d had to go all the way thinking Maidie was dead. Tell Rosamund as soon as you can, Jen. She’s all broken up. But fancy that man thinking of sending me word! I’d never have believed it of him! Saving Maidie’s life is the kind of thing you’d expect him to do, but fancy him thinking of me! I’ll never say a nasty thing about him again!”

“He’s bringing Maidie home. I guess he’s saved her life twice over! He asked me if she was your Italian heiress, and then told me to run after you and tell you she’d be all right.”

“Bless him! He’s a dear!” Joy said, with heartfelt gratitude. “Give him my love—my best thanks, I mean! And say I’ll have the doc. here in no time. Everything’s worth while now! I thought it was a forlorn hope before, but I wasn’t going to collapse till we knew the worst for sure. Thanks awfully, Jenny-Wren!” and Eirene sped hooting on to fetch the doctor.

CHAPTER XXII

MAIDLIN'S PRIVATE SECRETARY

Until Joy came back with the doctor, Jen would not leave Maidlin's room. Andrew Marchwood gave directions and made some useful suggestions, and these Jen carried out carefully, and was rewarded by seeing faint colour creep into Maidlin's gray face, and by feeling some warmth in her body again. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

The hero of the hour went off to carry Biddy home; then went back to his own house to change; and Jen came to the door of Maidlin's room and called softly to Mary.

"Mary-Dorothy, there's a job waiting for you. Do be a dear and help us out! I daren't leave Maidie; but some one ought to be with Mrs. Shirley. She isn't fit for shocks, and this has been a shock. If you'd talk to her and tell her all you know, it would help a lot. Maidie's going on all right; Mr. Marchwood says so. Tell her that. And you ought to bathe Biddy's ankle; he says she's wrenched it badly, but it isn't sprained. Bandage it tightly; Mrs. Shirley will tell you where to find things. She'll tell you what to do!" as Mary began to ask helpless questions about hot or cold water and other details. "It will be good for her to have something besides Maidie to think about."

"And good for Mary-Dorothy, too!" she said to herself, as she turned back to Maidlin's side. "She isn't much use at a crisis! She looks scared to death. I wouldn't like to depend on her!"

She said as much to Joy later in the evening, when Maidlin was sleeping, and Rosamund and Biddy were having dinner together in bed. Joy had at first decreed that they must stay in their separate rooms, but that had a feeling of punishment, and such was not her intention; so she had relented, and had allowed Biddy to join Rosamund in the big bed in a spare room to which Rosamund had been moved, so that Joy or Jen, sitting up to watch Maidlin, could have the use of her room with its connecting door.

"I'm not going to blame you, Rosamund," Joy had said quietly, while still under the strain of the first shock. "I know you didn't mean this to happen. You were only careless, and any girl in her senses would be careful after this. You've nearly killed Maidie; you won't forget that. It was an accident, of course; but it wasn't exactly a necessary part of a Sunday afternoon. If you'd stayed in our garden it would never have happened. Don't ever forget what you brought on us all; and what might have been; that's all."

Rosamund, with the beginning of a severe cold on her, had been too shaken and unhappy to attempt excuses where she knew none could be any good. She had cried, and shivered, and said over and over again that she was sorry; and Joy, a little anxious on her account also, had sent her to bed, but had allowed her to have Biddy's company. And Biddy had a great deal to say.

Joy agreed gravely with Jen's comment on Mary. "Don't you think it's a result of all she told us last night? It seems to me just what you'd expect. She's lived for so long among unreal things that when real things happen she's all at sea. And she goes all shaky; she hasn't any nerves to speak of. But I believe she'll get better and stronger all the time now, if only she doesn't go back. I'm not a scrap surprised to find her no use in an emergency, though."

"Mary-Dorothy, you'll have to stay a few days longer, whether the office likes it or not," Joy said, as they were saying good-night. No one had said anything about going up to town

that evening, but Jen had had a few words with her father on the 'phone.

"I can't spare you," Joy explained. "Jen must go up to town on Tuesday; and if Maidie's fit to be left, I must go just for the day on Thursday as usual. I think she'll be all right by then, unless anything fresh turns up. But I want your help and company when Jen goes; and I'll be far happier when I go myself if you're here. Auntie needs somebody. I shall borrow Jen again after Tuesday night, if I can; but you really must stay with us for this week, at least. I'll make it all right at the office; they can get in a temporary person to do your work, if they're very busy. But your work's here, for this week, and it will be better for Biddy, too. She couldn't possibly get up all those stairs; and you couldn't carry her."

"You know how glad I'll be to do anything I can," Mary said doubtfully. "But I'm afraid I'm not very much use. I never know what to do."

"I had a heart-to-heart talk with Mary-Dorothy last night," Joy announced, when she met Jen on Thursday night. Maidie was so much better that there had seemed no reason, with Mary at the Hall, why Joy should not carry out a cherished plan, and stay the night in town with Jen, so that they could go together to see the Pixie next day. "I got her talking, and after a while she opened her heart to me. I made her talk as much as I could, and collected several valuable bits of evidence for the Little One to-morrow. Mary-Dorothy doesn't dream I'm going to betray her confidence; but it's all for her good. She's got a fearfully low opinion of herself, and distrusts herself to the limit. If you notice, she always says 'I think,' and often qualifies her opinion, if she ever does express one, with 'But I may be wrong. It's only what I think.' I told her she'd got to be sure about things, and I should throw cushions at her whenever I heard her say 'I think.' And she said slowly, as if she were thinking it out, 'I suppose the trouble really is that I don't think enough; I mean, think deeply about things. And so I haven't any solid opinions formed to fall back on. It's always been a bother to think in earnest, and I've been tired at night and haven't had the energy to force myself to it. It was so much easier just to go off into dreams and be happy,' or something like that. 'So I suppose I'm paying out for it now,' she finished up."

"That wasn't bad for Mary-Dorothy," Jen said, with approval. "She'd thought that out, anyway."

"She's been thinking a lot since she talked to us in the Abbey. Before that she just enjoyed herself and had a holiday and got better every day. But she got so much better that she had to own up to us; that's how it seems to me! And you know how it helps to put a thing into words; you see it more clearly at once. She's been thinking it over since Saturday night, and she's decided that she's a coward and very lazy and useless. That's what she says. I said she might have been, but there was no need to go on being like that, now that she'd found it out."

Jen laughed. "You didn't deny any of the dreadful things? Poor Mary-Dorothy! You are merciless, 'Travellers' Joy!'"

"I didn't. They're true. It wasn't unkind to agree with her, when she said it herself. But I like her heaps, in spite of all that. I like her more and more. People are more interesting if they aren't perfect, so long as they're sporting enough to realise it and struggle to be better. I believe Mary-Dorothy's going to put up a decent fight, and she'll be her own proper self in time. She hasn't been herself yet, I'm quite sure."

"You're a good sort, 'Travellers' Joy,'" Jen said fervently. "You'll help her better than any one else could. I'm glad I took you to see her!"

"I'm glad you found her out, and were quick enough to see there was something wrong! She's tremendously grateful to you; she's been thinking over that, too; I mean, thinking how

the change in her began. And when she speaks of you, there's something very meaning in her voice," Joy said gravely. "She'll be grateful to you for ever. But I want help! The situation's too difficult for me, or you, alone. That's why I'm going to see the Pixie to-morrow. I don't know what to do next; I think we're all right so far. There's one other thing I must tell you!" and she broke into a laugh. "Biddy has re-arranged her future!"

"Oh—Biddy!" Jen laughed. "She's a business woman through and through! Yes, I suppose it would need some re-arrangement! What's the latest plan?"

"I only heard through Maidlin. She whispered it last night, when I went in to say good-night. I think Biddy was shy, impossible as it seems! Maidie wanted to know if I didn't think she'd need to have a private secretary when she comes of age? And if so, couldn't Biddy be it? For she'd simply love to have her!"

"A beautiful plan!" Jen laughed. "Were you nice about it?"

"Oh, rather! I said I thought she'd probably be the better of some one to help her, who could travel with her, as she'll have to live in Italy at times. And I thought Biddy would make a very jolly one; but she must get experience with some one else first. So Biddy's to work hard for the next seven years, on the understanding that she becomes Maidie's secretary when Madalena's twenty-one. And they're both very happy in the thought of it."

"I call it a very good plan!" Jen said warmly. "But where does Mary-Dorothy come in? Is she to be left alone?"

"I've a plan for Mary-Dorothy! But I want to ask the Pixie about it first. I don't feel that Mary-Dorothy's ready for it yet. She's not grown-up enough! I'm afraid I'll have to wait till she grows."

"Joy! She's nearly ten years older than you!"

"My dear infant, years have nothing to do with it. She's not grown since she was fifteen. Now I grew old in a single day; the day I killed you. I'm years older than Mary-Dorothy."

"It's made you much nicer than you used to be! It was worth while being killed if it turned you into something so jolly! And since I'm none the worse for being killed, I'm jolly glad it happened!" Jen said definitely.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOLDING THE ROPE

"Here you are!" and the Pixie came running out of the back of the little West End shop to greet them. "I am so glad to see you! Come along and see everything! Are you going to have a frock?" to Joy. "I'll love to make one for you! This is the shop!" and she turned proudly to do the honours.

On the little counter, on the shelves behind, and on the ledges against the opposite wall, were piles of beautiful handwoven materials, in vivid, or delicate, or soft shades of colour. In one corner, in an open cupboard, were heaped spools of thread and wool and silk ready for use on the looms. The Pixie pulled out piece after piece of the finished goods and spread them on the counter to tempt Joy.

"Dear Pixie, stop!" Joy implored. "I'll have every single one! If you go on, I shall have to cut down my beech avenue to pay for them! I simply can't resist such gorgeous things!"

"The colours are so topping!" Jen sighed. "I want a frock, too! I'll have to make love to Daddy! May I bring him to see them, Pixie? It might have a good effect!"

"Do bring him! We'll love to see him. Come and see the looms and the girls at work."

"The colours are weird, though," Jen exclaimed, as one after another original design caught her eye. "I'd never have dreamed of putting some of them together. They're right, of course; you feel that as soon as you see them. But some of them are mixtures I'd never have dared to think of! How do you know they'll turn out all right?"

The Pixie turned over the materials with eager, loving hands, and explained which thread was the warp and what material it was—a silken warp woven with wool, or mixtures of wool and thread. "I don't know; I'm only learning about colours. It's fascinating; I've always loved them, and loved certain colours together; now I'm learning why. I'm happy all day long, working among such beautiful things. And it's quiet; it's such a change after racing about the country. Of course I go away now and then; but I'm glad to be settling in town for a bit. I love London! I've a little workroom upstairs, where I sit and work and have time to think; and it's a real rest. I enjoy making up these lovely things and designing them to suit people. And I have dancing at night, at Plaistow; or when I'm not teaching, at the town classes. I'm very happy! All the rich colours are very soothing."

"I should have thought they'd be exciting!" Joy demurred.

"They're stimulating, but they're soothing, too, because they're so satisfying."

She led them into the back shop, to be greeted by a staid cat and a lively white dog, to be introduced to the weaving girls, and to see the looms. Some wide silk was being woven; every possible colour seemed to be there, on a golden warp; and the effect was Eastern in its vivid brilliance. The soft-spoken Russian girl at work at the moment loosened the loom and drew out the finished work to show which strip she had done and which had been woven by her friend; the difference in effect was noticeable at a careful look, and to the surprise of the visitors, the quiet colouring had been wrought by the Russian, while the earlier breadth, which was almost barbaric in its brilliance, had been designed and carried out by the English girl.

"I know," said the Pixie, as they cried out in surprise and doubt. "You'd never have thought it, but it's so. That gorgeous bit is Molly's; the softer work is Anna's. They're both beautiful; but so different!"

"I put a forest in mine," said Anna, in her pretty soft accent. "See! Can you see it? Here! It is a forest!"

"Of course it is!" Jen cried excitedly. "Green and gold! Sunshine through the trees! Your beech avenue in early spring, Joy!"

Downstairs were more and larger looms; upstairs they saw the Pixie's workroom, and the dresses she was working on. In the shop were piles of carpets and rugs, of strange rich colours also, some "straight from the desert," as the Pixie told them proudly, others from China and Japan.

"It's a most fascinating spot!" Joy sighed. "I shall come to see you often here, Pixie. And I quite expect I shall order a frock every time! You'd better measure me and make notes; then you'll be prepared! But to start with, I'll have that lovely brown; your browns are too gorgeous for words! I simply can't resist them! Perhaps next time I'll ask you to have one woven on purpose for me; but I'm not clever enough to know how it would turn out, so at present I'll have the piece I can see finished. And now come out to lunch! You must tell us where to go. We've a big problem for you, and we're dying to hear what you'll say about it."

"Oh?" the Pixie looked up in eager interest. "Is it your children again? Aren't they happy together yet?"

"They're inseparable; adore one another, and all that kind of thing. Oh, do you know, we had such a fright on Sunday!" and as they went out together they told of the accident and explained the presence of Mary and Biddy at the Hall.

The Pixie made no comment, but her eyes kindled as she glanced appreciatively at the two girls taking the seats opposite to her at the table she had chosen. Her favourite place for lunch was on the balcony of a big corner restaurant, where five wide busy streets met, and streams of buses came slowly down each, or taxis whirled round all the corners. The traffic and the endless crowds fascinated the girls, and they hung over the railing and forgot their lunch and their problems.

But at last, when the coffee stage was reached, the Pixie drew them back to the business of the moment; and Joy turned from the seething whirlpool below and plunged eagerly into the story Mary had told in the Abbey. As the Pixie did not interrupt, but only listened with a face of almost greedy interest, so deeply absorbed was she, Joy went on to add the "evidence" collected by herself and Jen, of the effect, as they supposed, of Mary's dream-life on her character.

"Well, what are you going to do?" came the eager question. "You've got to help her now; you've simply got to! You do see that, don't you? You couldn't let her go back. She's like a drowning man to whom you've thrown a rope. You're safe ashore yourselves; and she's caught the rope and is hanging on for her life. She doesn't know that, but that's what it comes to. You'll never leave her to sink again?"

"You do think it was serious, then?" Joy asked soberly. "Oh, we won't let her down! Since it's happened that we've got hold of her, it's up to us to help her through. We quite see that. But we want you to tell us how to do it. Was it serious, Pixie? We'd never heard of anything like it in a grown person."

"It ought not to be in a grown person. It's abnormal, and horribly dangerous. Children are different; they have to dream dreams and see visions! But for a grown woman to waste her life and energies so—*no*! It was very serious indeed. I can't tell you how it would have ended, but it would have been in something very unpleasant. You'd get complete dissociation eventually, I suppose;—but that's rather beyond us to discuss! But I'm certain your Mary couldn't go on

living unnaturally, exciting her imagination without giving it any outlet, without paying very heavily for it.”

“What do you think would have happened to her?” Jen asked anxiously.

“It doesn’t matter. The thing is for us to see that it doesn’t happen still. She’s by no means clear of it; you can’t say she’s safe from the habit of years in three or four weeks. Her nerves would have given way, probably; she’d have become a neurasthenic invalid in a few years more; of it might have been her brain. She was living two lives, and the unreal one was getting stronger every day. At last it would have conquered, since she was feeding it all the time; the real life would have slipped away, and she’d have lived only in her dreams; happy enough, perhaps, but ruined for life, with no mind left to use. All you describe in her as the results are the signs of it; of course she is inefficient, and doubtful of herself, and nervous, and unwilling to take responsibility. How could she be otherwise? She knows she’s unfit. She knows she has shirked real life for years. Of course she can’t trust herself now. You’ve saved her, for the moment, from chronic invalidism and possibly worse; but the thing is there. It won’t be conquered all at once. It’s a well-known thing, you know; there are plenty of cases of it; your Mary isn’t the only one.”

“But how can we help her now?” Jen burst out explosively. “We want to help her; we’re dying to! We wouldn’t let her go back for anything. But how can we do it best?”

“We don’t want her to know we’re doing it,” Joy added anxiously. “You wouldn’t say all that to her, as you’ve just done to us, would you?”

“It wouldn’t do any good. And she probably knows most of it already. Oh, it’s no good talking to her! She’s drugged her conscience and her mind; she’ll only make excuses and persuade herself they’re true. But I’m not blaming her, poor child! Don’t think that for a moment!” the Pixie said swiftly. “It’s easy to see how it happened. She’s got imagination, probably a vivid one; and it was checked by her father’s death, just when it was feeling its way into life. If she’d been able to go on writing, all this might never have happened. At least it would never have got such a hold on her. But with imagination, and no outlet for it, and a monotonous business life, she had excuse for finding romance within herself. Her imagination is her gift, and it demanded a vent; it had to be satisfied. Her life couldn’t supply what it wanted, so it created it for itself. She might have taken to novels, and become a chronic reader of trashy stuff. There must have been something in her that could not be satisfied with that. I don’t say she wasn’t to blame; she could have fought this, if she had known what was happening. But probably she never realised it. I can see plenty of excuse for her; but it’s quite certain that it mustn’t go on.”

“But what can we do? You don’t want us to warn her?”

“I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t say much about it to her, unless she seems to want to know what you think. If she begins asking, tell her any or all of what I’ve said; but I don’t think she will. How to help her? You know that for yourselves. You’ve stumbled on it by chance; but it wasn’t really chance. Jen started giving her the thing she’d enjoyed so much herself; that wasn’t chance! Go on as you’ve begun; you’re on the right lines. You gave her music and dancing; probably she was starving for both. Then you gave her new friendships and interests and change of scene; and you found you’d changed her too. You’d lifted her out of her unreal world into a new real one, full of life and interest and beauty and new ideas. And she found she hadn’t any more time for unreal things. There’s your answer. Give her more music; keep her dancing—the exercise is good for her. It will stir her blood and keep her healthy. Take her to watch classes now and then, but not too much. Don’t let her get into the way of looking on

at things. It isn't good for her. Make her do them. Looking on and enjoying will rouse her, but if she doesn't work it off somehow she'll be the worse for it, if anything. You see," the Pixie was warming to her subject, and spoke with eager energy, "what Mary has been starving for, all along, has been an outlet. Her nature's been craving for it. As she couldn't have the natural one she had a right to, she had to create an unnatural unhealthy one. Of course, it was unconscious, but that's what it comes to. When you came along and made her dance, you gave her the first chance she'd known for years to work off some of what she was feeling. You say she told you, rather as a joke, that after that time she danced first, at Plaistow, she went home and wrote long letters that she'd been shirking for months. It isn't funny to me; it's what I'd have expected. I'm glad she had the grit to do *something*; it doesn't matter much what. Don't you see? You'd wakened her mind; it had to work. If she'd had her father to guide her, she'd have written a story, since that's evidently her natural mode of expression."

"Oh, I wish she had! Why did he go and die?" Jen wailed. "I'm sure it would have been interesting!"

"You've wakened your Mary's real life," said the Pixie definitely. "You may also have saved her reason. But now, unless she's to go back, to be worse than before, you've got to help her to express that life. She must find her outlet; something worth living for. She must *do* things; that's what it comes to."

"Dance, do you mean?" Jen asked doubtfully.

"That's a step; a big first step, for her. It's fine to hear she's taking up morris and sword; they'll all help her to forget herself. But she mustn't stop with merely dancing; that's not an end. It is expression, but it's not enough. She must use that dancing for other people,—as you're doing," to Jen. "Make her teach. Find her a little class and make her start. At least she'll know more than they do."

"Pixie, you are unexpected!" gasped Joy. "Mary-Dorothy teaching! I can't quite see that!"

"She'd die at the thought," said Jen.

"She'll get used to it. Make any reason you like; say it's to help you, and you'll be so grateful. Make her take your class now and then; or find her some very poor children and give them into her hands one evening a week. It would be the saving of her. And then you've got to make her begin writing again. That's obvious."

Joy looked at Jen, and Jen at Joy.

"It didn't seem very obvious!" Joy remarked. "I should have said it was impossible."

"But we can't advise her, Pixie," Jen objected. "And she says her stories were no good."

"We can find some one to advise her. Why don't you ask our Writing Friend? Jen can talk to her at classes. She'll know."

"Pixie, do you mind if I hug you in public?" Joy asked fervently.

"Of course you must ask her. Don't say a word about phantasy; that's the scientific name of the thing Mary-Dorothy's been indulging in. Just tell her you have a friend—but they've met, you say? All the better. Tell her all you can about Mary's attempts at writing, and ask her advice."

"We will!" Joy said, with energy. "And we'll bully Mary-Dorothy till she produces something we can show to the Writing Person, to give her something to go on. Pixie, you've helped us a lot, and we've taken up all your lunch time. But I've one more question. I'd been planning a way to help Mary-Dorothy, and I want to know what you say about it. I don't think it's quite the thing for her, at least not yet. But in some ways it would be top-hole. I've been

wondering if she could be the matron for my girls' hostel. You know I'm still hunting for the right person."

"Oh, Joy, that would be ripping! Then she'd live near you all the time," Jen cried eagerly. "But would she do it?" and her face clouded. "She wouldn't take it on; she'd be scared, Joy!"

Joy looked at the Pixie. Her face had lit up, but she was looking very thoughtful.

"Not yet," she said, after a long moment of gazing down at the buses and taxis and crowds. "In time, yes! It would be ideal; you say she loves the country. But she ought to come back home and fight this thing out first. Don't you see, if you keep her always in the country, those dreams will be behind her as a part of her town life, and she'll keep a fear that if she ever has to live in town again, they will all come back? I know I should. She must feel that they are gone for ever, because she's so much stronger that she can keep them at bay; it mustn't be the mere accident of living in the country and changing her work that has saved her. Let her come home; she'd have to come for her sister's sake, anyway. Keep her busy; start her writing again; make her take the responsibility of teaching, even if it's only occasionally or only a few children at a time; and of course keep in touch with her, and help her to make friends; widen her life in every way you can. In a year or two you'll find she'll be quite different, if all goes well. *Then*, if Biddy can get a post, you can transport Mary to the country and give her charge of your girls, and she'll be happier than she's ever been in her life, whether she's making a success of the writing or not. I don't say she'll be successful, but I do say she must try. And always remember, she's your responsibility. You threw the rope that saved her; now you've got to hold that rope and never let her sink again till she's safely ashore."

"We'll hold on for all we're worth!" Joy said fervently.

CHAPTER XXIV

MARY-DOROTHY MAKES THE PLUNGE

After a happy, quiet week-end at the Hall, Mary and Biddy came back to town late on Sunday night. The Hall and the Abbey had seemed lonely without Jen, but the girls were hoping to see her on Tuesday night at her class; and everything else at the Hall was going well. Biddy's foot had recovered from the wrench she had given it in the ivy; Rosamund's cold was better; and Maidlin was throwing off the effects of the shock, though still shaky and easily tired. It was understood that Mary and Biddy were to come back for a long week-end quite soon, and all the girls were looking forward to this next meeting.

On Tuesday Biddy came flying home from college, full of eagerness for the evening's dancing. "Won't it be topping to see Jen again? Isn't it gorgeous to have this to look forward to once a week?" she cried exuberantly, and caught up her whistle and ran through "Ruffy Tufty."

"It just makes all the difference," Mary was excited too, but more quietly.

"Rather! If there's nothing else exciting happening, there's always Tuesday to live for! Doris wants me to go to the pictures to-morrow night; but, I say, Mary! I don't think I can."

"Oh? Why not? You always used to like it." Mary had been disappointed on Monday night, when Biddy came in and announced that she was going to the pictures with Doris. She had made no objection, however, believing, rightly, that to try to hinder Biddy would be the surest way to make her determined to go; Biddy had been quieter than usual when she returned, and had said the show had been "quite all right," but she had not seemed enthusiastic.

Now, however, Biddy's impressions had had time to crystallise. "I can't stick it," she said abruptly. "It was such rot last night! Doris and the rest said it was a scream, but it didn't seem funny to me, only silly and a bit vulgar. I can't get out of going altogether, I suppose; but I can't be bothered with it often. I'm sure Rosamund would say it was rot, and an awful waste of time. Besides, I want to work up my speed; I've got to qualify for being Maidie's secretary! I'm going to be a first class one, or it won't be fair to her. She can't take on a second-rate person just because it's me."

"Good business! I'm sure you'll find it will pay you," Mary said quietly, but rejoiced inwardly that the visit to the Abbey had done its work.

They were almost ready to start for the class, when imperative knocking sent Biddy flying to the door. She flung it open, and Jen came hurriedly in.

"Mary-Dorothy! I want you badly! I say, you'd like to be a dear, and help me out of an awful hole, wouldn't you? I simply don't know what on earth to do!"

"I'd like to do anything I can," Mary said, with anxious eyes. "But I'm afraid there's not very much I can do. What's the trouble?"

"The class to-night. I can't let the girls down. But some very old friends of Mother's have turned up unexpectedly, and she's asked them for the evening, and there's a girl of my age, and Mother wants me to be at home for dinner. I don't see how I can get away! I simply can't leave Mother to do everything; she gets so worried, poor dear, and it's so bad for her! She doesn't sleep if she has a worrying day. I can't leave her to get through alone." She looked at

Mary with anxious eyes. No one could have guessed how she had seized on this chance, and how, if it had not happened, she had planned to create just such a crisis before long.

Biddy's face was full of woe. "Then can't we have our class? And we were looking forward to it so awfully much!" she wailed.

"Shall we go and tell them at the club for you?" Mary could not hide her disappointment either.

"Oh, but I hate to feel I'm letting the girls down! They'll all be so awfully upset, and it's a whole week before they can come again! Couldn't you take the class for me, just for this once, Mary-Dorothy?"

"I?" Mary cried, and eyed Jen as if she suspected her of sudden softening of the brain. "I couldn't teach a class! Jenny-Wren, I should be terrified!"

"Oh, you needn't be!" Jen and Biddy spoke together.

Biddy, radiant with new hope, cried eagerly, "You can do it, Mary darling! Then we'll have our class, after all! We'll all be lambs! You'll enjoy it! Oh, do, do be a sport and say you will!"

Mary looked in helpless dismay at Jen. "Why did you suggest anything so awful? I'd die of fright! And I couldn't do it. I don't know any more than the girls do; less, for we've missed three weeks!"

"Oh, you'll tell them to show you what they've been doing!" Jen said easily. "Then you'll teach them 'Hey, Boys;' they've never done that yet, and you know I taught it to you on the lawn at the Hall! Don't say you've forgotten!" severely.

"We haven't! We even remember the 'gipsy!'" Biddy cried triumphantly. "I'll help, Mary, if you'll only try!"

"And then you'll begin them on 'Bacca Pipes,'" Jen went on eagerly. "Biddy can demonstrate, to show what you mean. You chalk a cross on the floor instead of pipes, you know. They'll simply love it; and it will be quite new to them. You'll make them teach you the new sword-dance figures, of course. It will be an awfully jolly evening, Mary-Dorothy, and I shall have an easy mind. I'll run round afterwards to hear how you've got on; they'll be able to spare me for a few minutes after dinner; it's then I'm needed most. Do say it's all right, for I ought to get back!"

"Oh, but I can't!" Mary wailed, every shy bit of her nature and every shred of self-distrust coming to the surface. "I've never done anything of the kind!"

"That's where the fun comes in, for you," Jen told her promptly. "It's always jolly doing things for the first time. You might grumble if I asked you to do shorthand all evening! But a new excitement like teaching 'Bacca Pipes' to girls who have never seen it before——! You ought to be thrilled at the chance. You'll have an awfully jolly time!"

"I can't feel like that. It seems to me a horribly difficult thing to do. I don't feel as if I could face it," Mary said nervously. "I should only make a fool of myself, and never feel I could go near the place again. Jen, I can't!"

"Oh, Mary!" Biddy wailed. And then, wildly, but more wisely than she knew: "What does it matter how you feel, if it helps Jen out of a hole? Think how jolly decent she's been to us! You can't let her down! I couldn't help, could I, Jen? I'll try, if you like."

"It's sweet of you, Biddy. But Mary would be far better. Lots of the girls are older than you. They'd pay more attention to her."

Mary looked up, frightened courage in her eyes, her face determined. "I don't think I can do it. But if you'd like me to try, I'll do my best," she said hurriedly. "As Biddy says, we can't

let you down, if you really want anything from us. But I don't know what will happen!"

"You dear!" Jen said fervently. "Then I can be happy. Now I'll run; but I'll look in again later, if I can. Good luck to you! The music's all there, and Miss Gardner will play anything you want. 'Bacca Pipes' is in Morris IV. I'll be grateful to you for ever!" and she fled, before Mary could change her mind.

"I felt an awful brute," she said, when she told Joy and the Pixie about it afterwards. "I knew she was in for an awful ordeal, and that she'd be miserable for the next hour or two. But it was all for her good! I'd have liked to go with her and hold her hand, poor dear! But she's a sport, really and truly, and I was sure she'd pull through."

"Oh, Mary, I do love you!" Biddy chanted exultantly.

"Don't be an idiot!" Mary said brusquely. "You may not love me by the time we get home again. Let's go, and get it over! We're late already. Jen kept us back."

"If I do anything too silly, I shall never come again," she said tremulously, a sudden spasm of nerves seizing her as they reached the hall.

"Oh, but you won't! And if you'd let Jen down, I don't see that you could ever have looked her in the face again! And it would have been worse to lose Jen than to have to give up the club."

"That's true," Mary said unhappily. "There wasn't much choice. But I never thought I should try to teach anybody! Well, let's get on with it!"

"The swords won't be so bad," Biddy said consolingly. "The girls have got to teach us what they've done."

Only six girls besides themselves came for the first half-hour. To these Mary explained Jen's suggestion, and the girls took her meaning to be that Miss Robins could not come early, but would, of course, appear presently for the real class. They laughed, being more than doubtful of their power to remember what they had done.

"I guess we'll make some jolly old muddles, but let's have a shot at it, and see how far we get," one said good-naturedly.

"We'll tie ourselves up in knots to amuse Biddy Devine," said another, and with much laughter and many contradictory directions they took the wooden swords and proceeded to worry out "Threedlings A, B, and C," with occasional suggestions from the pianist.

The ensuing muddles reduced them all to helpless laughter and despair; but they struggled with the problem till all were hot and breathless, and till the movements began to go more smoothly. Number eight was sure of her part, and insisted on doing it; and in time, with some prompting from the rest, numbers one and two began to realise what they must do to help her. By the time the other girls had begun to arrive, the movements were really beginning to go as they had gone under Jen's careful eye, and the team was triumphant and sure they would never forget again.

In the tension and the laughter which relieved it, Mary had forgotten the ordeal before her. It came on her like a blow, when a girl cried: "Where's Miss Robins? Isn't she here?"

"Coming late," said one of the sword-dancers, hurrying away with the bundle of wooden swords.

Biddy looked at Mary. Mary, with a horrible shock of remembrance, turned white, and her lips tightened. She dashed into her ordeal to get it over.

Running up on to the platform beside the piano, and unconscious that her knees were shaking, though she knew it afterwards when they ached all night, she stood and hammered on

the desk with a morris stick, as Jen had often done to gain silence. As the girls turned in surprise, she said quickly, sudden nervous colour in her face:

“Girls, Miss Robins is very sorry, but she can’t be here to-night. She had no time to get any one else, so she asked me to take her place. I’m afraid it’s a case of either that or closing the club for this evening. She was most anxious you shouldn’t miss your dancing, so she asked me to teach you one or two new things she has taught Biddy and me while we’ve been away in the country. Could somebody find us a piece of chalk?”

Chalk, in a folk-dance class, was an unusual and exciting requirement. Some was speedily forthcoming, and the girls watched wide-eyed while Biddy, much amused, drew a white cross on the floor.

“Biddy will show you the dance, and then, if you like it, you shall all try. Please play this!” and Mary placed the “Greensleeves” music before the pianist. “It’s a very well-known Old English tune, and very haunting.”

She stood by the girl and timed her and told her when to change the figure, while Biddy, in the centre of a breathless delighted ring, danced the jig. At the change of mode in the third figure, the pianist, a musical girl, gasped and stumbled; then began again, murmuring: “How absolutely weird!”

“Yes, but isn’t it beautiful?” Mary responded, and the girl nodded, staring at the music with fascinated eyes.

She laughed as the fourth figure reverted to the earlier mode; but the girls, watching Biddy’s gymnastics, had no attention for the music, so utterly thrilled and delighted were they with this new and most extraordinary development of a morris dance. Biddy was excited, too, and her hopping was wild and her feet were tapping all over the place; but she got through without a breakdown, and the room rang with applause, and then with an insistent demand: “Can’t we try? How ever does she do it? Oh, won’t you teach us, Miss Devine?”

“It was very bad,” Mary said severely. “If Biddy had had real pipes, they’d have been in splinters by the end of the first figure.”

After that the evening went with a swing. The girls were happy, each hopping round and over her own particular cross of chalk.

There was no time for country-dancing; no one wanted to do anything but “Bacca Pipes,” and Mary, not too sure yet of her power to control them unless they were happy and interested, let them have their way, and went round criticising and giving advice, forgetting that she had expected every moment of the evening to be a separate ordeal.

CHAPTER XXV

MARY-DOROTHY'S PROMISE

Mary was tired out by the time they went home, but as bright-eyed and happy as the rest; and she flushed in embarrassed delight, as girl after girl, changing shoes or getting out of tunics, thanked her for taking Jen's place and giving them such a jolly evening.

"You're a sport, Mary, old thing!" Biddy said warmly, as they called good-night and went off together. "It was simply topping; everybody loved it! And they liked you awfully. I heard the things they were saying afterwards. One said, 'Miss Devine's a dear. I thought at first I wouldn't like her, because she looked so stern. But she's awfully jolly. Perhaps she was a bit nervous just at first!' Of course, I didn't give you away!"

"A bit nervous! I was all shaky inside. It's very good of them."

"And another said: 'I think Miss Devine's awfully sporting. She comes into the class and learns just like the rest of us, and yet if Miss Robins can't come she can teach us ripping things like that!' They think you really know *all* about folk-dancing, and that you've been hiding it all this time!"

"Oh, but they mustn't! And they can't possibly think that. They can see how bad I am."

"They saw you knew that topping jig to-night, and they simply loved you for carrying on for Jen, so that they didn't have to miss their evening. I'm dying to tell her all about it!"

"Don't say too much!" Mary pleaded. "You do exaggerate, you know, Biddy."

They were preparing supper when the sound of the morris pipe took Biddy flying to the door. Jen had halted at the last turn of the stair to play a triumphant "Laudnum Bunches." Waving the pipe, she came racing up to Biddy.

"Well, how did she get on? Was it all right?"

"Simply topping! They all say they've had a ripping evening! Jen, she did it beautifully! Don't listen to a word she says!"

"I was fearfully nervous," Mary faced Jen shyly, but with satisfied eyes because she had not failed her.

"You poor dear! I was afraid you would be. But I was sure you could do it. Tell me all about it, Biddy!"

"Will you have some coffee with us?" Mary begged. "I know you've just had dinner, but we'd like to entertain you."

"I'd love it, if you'll go on with your supper. You must be starving; I always am, after that class! But I came off without waiting for coffee. Thank you so much! Now tell me, Biddy!"

"It was rather priceless!" and Biddy launched forth into a long story, interrupted continually by Mary, who tried to tone down her exaggerated style and had to be sternly suppressed by Jen.

"I'm just awfully glad!" Jen said warmly, at the end. "It's exactly what I expected, of course, and I believe every word of it, in spite of Mary-Dorothy's remarks. Now I want to know something. It was no use asking you before. The Pixie knows a club of children in North London, not far from here, who are just dying to do country-dancing once a week. They can't afford to pay for a teacher, but they could give travelling expenses, and they've got a hall and a pianist and a piano. Now, would you take them on, Mary-Dorothy? It means a regular

evening once a week, with Biddy to help if she can spare the time. They'd be your own kiddies, and you'd choose their dances and teach them from the very beginning."

"Oh!" Mary said slowly, and stared at her, doubt and hope struggling for mastery in her face. "Oh, but would I be good enough? I'd have said it was impossible at tea time, of course; but I enjoyed this evening, when I stopped being frightened. I'd simply love to have some children of my own, and give them, step by step, what you've given me. But I don't think I'm nearly good enough yet."

Jen reached for a cushion and held it poised threateningly. "I've orders from Joy to throw something at you whenever you say you don't think you're good enough! After to-night you know perfectly well you can do it beautifully. It only needs a little courage to start, and I'm going to see that you do it. Don't be daft, Mary-Dorothy! You're six weeks ahead of the children; if you keep on coming to my classes, I'll see that you have plenty of new dances for them. And now and then I'll come down and keep a motherly eye on them, and pull their style to pieces for you. That's settled, then. I'll ring up the Pixie to-morrow. She'll be very glad. She hadn't forgotten you; she told me to ask you."

"But will she think I'm good enough?" Mary asked anxiously.

"My dear, she wants you to take them on. She'll be ever so grateful! It will keep you busy, for you'll find you want to think a lot about your class during the week; the best dances for them, and the best way to teach the dances, and how to correct their faults, and so on. But it's jolly to be busy. It makes life feel worth while. I get to feel awful if I haven't a lot of things going on."

"I'll like it," a touch of colour crept into Mary's face. "It will leave no time for thinking of—other things; for being dull and miserable," she added hastily, for Biddy's benefit.

"If you're ever dull and miserable again, I'll never forgive you! But you mustn't think all the time about the class! There's another thing you're going to do, or I'll be horribly disappointed in you."

"What's that? I don't want to disappoint you," Mary smiled at her, a trifle nervously.

"Do you remember that evening you came to watch our classes, when Madam was teaching? Well, do you remember talking to that Writing Person?"

Mary nodded, with interested face. "She told me to try to dance myself. I'd only thought of looking on while Biddy danced. It seems funny now."

"I guess you're glad you didn't stick watching me all the time!" Biddy remarked.

"I am," Mary admitted, colouring. She looked at Jen to hear more.

"I had a long talk with her about books last week. I told her about your writing, and——"

"Jen!" there was dismay and reproach in Mary's cry.

"Of course I did, silly. She was very much interested, and she says you've got to try again and go on trying; she says it's the only way. She wanted badly to see something you'd written, but I said I thought you'd burnt them all," Jen paused.

Mary, with flushed bent face, nodded vigorously. "They were no good. Why did you tell her?"

"Because we all know you can write, and you ought to be doing it. You've slacked for years," Jen said severely. "Now you've got to start again. Quite likely your first start wasn't the right one: your own father told you that. She said she tried lots of things before she settled down to school stories for girls. Now, Mary-Dorothy!" and Jen characteristically warmed to her subject and spoke eagerly and with enthusiasm. "You've got to find your right line and stick to it, that's all. You've got to try to write, anything, all kinds of things, till you find one

that will sell. You may not write only to make money; you shouldn't, and of course you won't. You'll write because it's the thing you care most about doing. But it's no fun writing things that nobody's going to read; things are written on purpose to be read! So you've got to write things that will get put in the papers, or that are good enough for books. And of course they'll be paid for."

"Oh, cheers!" Biddy cried joyfully. "Go on, Jen! Keep it up! That's the way to talk to her! I've always known she could do it, if she only would! I say, Mary darling! If you could get two guineas for a story or an article, we could be members of the dancing society and go to parties with Jen and Joy! And if you could write a book, perhaps we could go to the holiday schools they talk about, and have dancing all day long, and get to know everybody! I'm going as soon as I get a job and can save up enough!"

"There are too many 'ifs' in all that," Mary retorted, and looked at Jen anxiously. "Did your friend say anything about the kind of thing that would be likely to be printed? I've no idea how to start."

"She said you must write about real people and real things. I don't mean put all your friends in your stories, though you may put me in, if you like! I'd love it!" Jen laughed. "But she meant you must have ordinary people, and real life, and things everybody could understand and believe in. She says fanciful things, and allegories, and dreams, and fairies, and so on, are no good, however beautiful they are, unless you're a real genius, and perhaps not then unless you've made a big name already. If you're known, you may be able to sell anything; but if you're beginning, you must start with things people can understand. She said two other things, too! She said you were to get your sister to tell you things about school, and see if you couldn't write a short school story. It's to be lively, and full of things happening, and if you can make it funny it's almost sure to sell. And she said she'd tell you a good agent to send it to, and perhaps he'd be able to get it into one of the Christmas annuals, though it's too late for this year now, in most cases."

"Will you go halves if I supply the ideas, Mary?" Biddy chuckled. "I say, let's start to-night! I never thought of telling you to write school stories!"

"It's only common sense," Jen retorted. "She's used to girls; she ought to know most about them! You'll find your children useful, Mary-Dorothy. You must talk to them and get 'copy' out of them; I believe that's the correct word! Now you will have another shot at it, won't you? If it's only to please me and Joy?"

"If I ever do write a book," said Mary, her voice full of deep feeling, "I shall dedicate it to you. I owe everything to you and Joy; you've brought unto life again, you and your dancing. You've given me new hope; you've even made me feel that some day I may be able to do real things! I'd given up all thought of it. I will try again, if only because you've asked me to do it. And I think perhaps some day I shall have a book to dedicate to you. I shall word it: 'To my Fairy Godmother, Jen.' "

"I shall be more than proud!" Jen said wistfully. "I'm sure you will do it some day, Mary-Dorothy!"

[The end of *The Abbey Girls Again [unabridged]* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]