

# THE ABBEY GIRLS IN TOWN



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# THE ABBEY GIRLS IN TOWN

*by*  
ELSIE J. OXENHAM

First published 1925 by Collins.  
This ebook transcribed from the 1949 Collins edition.

*To*  
MARGARET BAYNE TODD  
CAMP FIRE GIRL AND FOLK-DANCER  
WITH LOVE AND HAPPY THOUGHTS  
OF VACATION SCHOOL DAYS

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## CHAPTER I

# RUTH ARRIVES

“Good-bye! Good luck to you! I hope they’ll be nice!”

“If they aren’t, come straight to us in Devonshire!” Kitty called shrilly after the outgoing train.

Ruth laughed and waved her hand again. “I’ll wire for you to meet me,” she called back.

Then as the train crept through the mazes of Southampton and gathered speed for its rush to town, she sank back in her corner and faced the new future.

Her dream lasted almost all the way to London. She had no wish to read and did not want any one to talk to. Things, real things that were still happening, were too interesting; the possibilities too great.

She had come face to face with the unknown future that morning, when the first glimpse of England came in sight. Escaping from Mrs. Gordon and Kitty, who had been so good to her on the voyage, she had hung over the side and gazed enthralled at England, as England became real; England, that she had dreamed of all her life, out there on the African farm. It was everybody’s dream to go “home,” to see England. Her mind was full of pictures of England, most of them wrong, she expected. But right or wrong, she was longing to be there.

She was travelling alone, and looked absurdly childish to be doing so; slight and slim, with bobbed fair hair which had a comforting tendency to be wavy, though no one could have called it curly. The rest of the family were coming in the spring, for circumstances had suddenly made it possible for everybody to have the longed-for trip “home”; but her father could not live in England in the winter; it was his poor health as a young man that had taken him out to the Cape, and it was not advisable for him to run risks now. So the rest were to follow in the spring, and have the summer in England. But Mrs. Gordon and Kitty, from the next farm, were coming in the autumn, and they had offered to bring Ruth to England with them, so that she might have a few months longer “at home”; and Ruth had accepted the offer joyfully. She was eighteen, though she did not look it; she was eager to see anything and everything she could, and was ready for every new experience.

All the same, the new experience had its trying side at the moment. For Mrs. Gordon and Kitty had relations in Devonshire, and were going straight to them from Southampton, in the hope of lessening in some degree the change from their own climate to that of an English winter. It was three days before Christmas, and Ruth shivered as she gazed out at the dreary brown country, with dripping green here and there. It was not the best time to see England, she knew; and charitably suspended judgment on its beauty, or otherwise. Then a red winter sunset closed the day; there were not even lights to look at outside; and she gave herself up to thought again.

The voyage had been intensely interesting, and Mrs. Gordon and Kitty had been very kind. Ruth had enjoyed every minute of the journey; she rather wished they had come a week later, so that she would have come in for the Christmas festivities on board the liner—she was sure there would have been plenty of fun going on. As it was, she felt a little doubtful about Christmas; in any case, it would probably be a very quiet one.

Everything depended on what her cousins were like; Ruth had felt that from the first, but she felt it with quite new force now that she was racing to meet them at the full speed of the

express train. Her cousins were to meet her in London; she had wired to Mary from Southampton. They were her only relations in England, her only possible home, unless she fled to Mrs. Gordon in Devonshire, and she had only the vaguest notion what they were like.

There were only two of them. Biddy was younger than herself, about sixteen, and went to college; and that was literally all Ruth knew about her. It was enough to hold out immense possibilities; but possibilities of many kinds.

Mary——? Ruth knit her brows. She had done so every time she had come to this point in her thinking during the voyage. It mattered so much what Mary was like; everything turned on that, for the next four or five months. And she knew so very little.

She knew more about Mary than about Biddy; but what she knew was not all reassuring. Mary had been writing letters, just occasionally, though not so often as the exiles on the farm would have liked. Mary had been asked if Ruth might come to stay with them in London, and had written to welcome her. But she had added that they could not promise to do much to entertain her; their income was very small, and she had to go to work in an office every day, while Biddy went to college to prepare herself for a similar post. They would be glad to give the unknown cousin a home, if she would be satisfied with what they could do for her; but their resources and their free time were limited, and Mary was afraid she would have to go about and do her shopping and sightseeing alone.

Ruth was quite equal to that. A thorough Colonial, she meant to see everything, do everything, and was prepared to look after herself. She had no objection to asking her way or to going about alone, and was without a trace of shyness. But she did wonder a trifle anxiously just how poor her cousins were, and whether her coming would really be awkward for them. Had they, for instance, anywhere to put her? What kind of place did they live in? She was prepared to rough it, if necessary, but just how did one “rough it” in London? On the veldt, in a tent, she would have known what to expect. But what happened when one was poor in London?

She would soon know; and it would all be interesting. But she hoped sincerely she was not being a real trouble to Mary and Biddy.

What exactly did she know about Mary? For Mary, as the head of the family, mattered most; Biddy was still only a schoolgirl, or at least a student. Ruth went over it again, as she had done so often during her journey; it had seemed little enough to know when she started, but had seemed to be getting less as England and Mary drew nearer. Now that she was really in England, and it was a case of London and Mary, and London was drawing nearer every moment, Ruth felt she knew very little indeed.

Mary was so old, to begin with. Over thirty, Ruth understood; nearly twice Biddy’s age. Ruth felt secretly a little afraid of her. If she had been twenty-five, even, she would not have seemed so far away. So thought eighteen. And she feared very greatly that Mary was “stodgy,”—dull, quiet, uninteresting, middle-aged. How could she help being dull at thirty? Besides, there had been her letters. Mary had written now and then, during the last few years since her mother’s death, to one or other of the African aunts; but the letters had been obviously duty letters, carrying on her mother’s work, keeping up the connection with the distant relatives because her mother would have wished her to do so. Judging from those letters, Mary was staid and dull, and cared only about her office work, with no outside interests; Ruth made a grimace as she thought of it. There had been no word in the letters of concerts, theatres, dances; did Mary never go anywhere? And she lived in London! Could she not afford to go out? Or did she not care for it?

"I'm afraid she's going to get several shocks when she sees me!" Ruth thought grimly. "I guess I'll wake them up a bit! But what about Biddy? Doesn't she want to go out? Perhaps Mary sits on her and won't let her have any fun! Then I shall have to stand up for Biddy, that's all. She and I will go out together, and Mary can sit at home and darn stockings or type manuscript! I do wonder which it is—that they can't afford it, or that Mary won't go herself and won't let Biddy go! If it's money, I can help—if they'll let me! But if it's sheer stodginess on Mary's part, I shall have to reform her. Can you reform people of that age? Poor little Biddy! She must have had a thin time of it! I'll try to make it up to her!"

And then at this point, Ruth's thoughts were always shipwrecked on one fact, which threw them all into confusion and left her drowning in a sea of uncertainty again. There had been a long time without any letter from Mary; so long that her mother and aunts had begun to say Mary Devine had forgotten them at last. Then, last summer, had come a long letter, longer than any they had ever had, several closely typewritten sheets. The letter had not only been longer, but had also been different from any they had ever had; so different that it hardly seemed possible it could have come from the same person. It had been as interesting as a story, and had been read with great delight and handed round from farm to farm. It had been full of new interests, new friends; it had been alive, while all that had gone before it had been dull and lifeless.

Had Mary miraculously wakened up and come to life? Was this the real Mary, and had she been suppressed in the earlier letters, for some reason? Or was this another Mary, who had somehow escaped for a day to write that letter, and then gone back into hiding again? Which Mary would meet her at the London terminus? The stodgy Mary of several years' acquaintance, or the new thrilling Mary who had written that strange letter?

The letter had been so full of vivid life, and all that it had spoken of had been so new to the dwellers out in the wilderness, and so surprising when taken in connection with the uninteresting Mary! For it had spoken of music, of tunes which "went on and on, haunting one for days together"; and of dancing—*dancing*! To think of dancing and Mary together was ridiculous; and yet Mary had told of going to classes—only to watch, of course!—but still, it was surprising that she should have cared to go. She had spoken of country-dances; and Ruth's mother and aunts had wistfully recalled dances they had enjoyed in their childhood—"Haymakers," "Petronella," and "Sir Roger,"—and had wondered if these were the kind of dances she meant.

"Not like ordinary modern dancing at all," Mary had written. "That always looks so dull to me. This is so full of changes, and so beautiful, and it fits the music so wonderfully. But it looks difficult; one would have to go to classes."

She had spoken of something she called "morris," in which one apparently danced with sticks or handkerchiefs; and of dancing with swords. That, surely, could be only for men; and yet Mary seemed to imply that she had watched girls learning a sword-dance? There had been no hint that she had any thought of trying to learn the dances herself. "She wouldn't, of course. She'd be too old," Ruth said to herself. But Mary had said she hoped Biddy would go to classes and learn the dances; it was jolly to think of poor Biddy getting some change from her shorthand and book-keeping! Ruth's sympathy for the injured and downtrodden Biddy was very keen.

But the letter had told more, much more, than merely of the classes Mary had watched. It had described how new friends had come into her quiet life; a wealthy pretty girl, who was referred to at first as "Miss Robins," but who later on in the letter became lovingly just "Jen";



and “Miss Shirley,” who, as Mary’s story grew, became “Joy.” Ruth wondered hopefully if she would ever see these two; if the friendships had continued. But why should girls like that care to be friendly with some one like her cousin Mary Devine? That was a curious point, and one she could not answer. The friendship had seemed quite real and deep when Mary wrote, but it had probably not been lasting, Ruth thought.

It had been real enough, however, for “Jen” to call in her car and whirl Mary and Biddy off to a party. Quite a big part of Mary’s letter had been given up to the story of that party, and it was this which had given most delight to the distant readers. It had been a children’s party, in a big hall far away in the East End of London; the East End was a very poor district, Ruth understood, and the children had been very poor children; but they had come together to dance country-dances, and Mary had watched and had quite evidently found keen enjoyment in the sight. The party had been managed by some one she referred to as “the Pixie,” a little person in green; and in her descriptions of the Pixie, the dancing children, and the club-building in which the party had been held, Mary had forgotten all her natural restraint and had written freely and with warm enthusiasm. And the result had been that her aunts and cousins had asked one another if this was really Mary Dorothy Devine who was writing to them thus. Ruth wished she could have seen that party; and wondered much if there would be any chance for her to see “the Pixie” during her stay in London.

But interesting as the letter had been—as interesting as a book, said everybody who had read it—it had left Ruth more puzzled regarding Mary than ever. Which Mary was she hastening to meet?—the new Mary of that letter, or the Mary they had known for years?

There had been one more letter from Mary before she left home; but it had been very short, written hastily in answer to the letter asking if Ruth might come; and had been distinctly a return to the earlier style. There had been no time for description or even news. Mary had said briefly that she and Biddy had been away in the country for three weeks; that they were very busy going to “classes”; and that they had many plans which Ruth would hear when she arrived. That had been all, except for her welcome to the unknown cousin. That letter had not helped Ruth at all in her knowledge of Mary; it had rather added to her doubt and perplexity.

One other curious happening had completed her bewilderment. The very night before she left home, an English mail had come in; and among the newspapers had been one which was unfamiliar, a semi-religious weekly paper. Searching its pages to find why it had been sent, Ruth had come on a column marked with blue pencil; and had read it, first curiously, then eagerly. It was signed “M.D.D.”; and it told, simply but powerfully, of a crippled slum child’s day in the country; how a fairy godmother, with red-gold hair, and wearing soft, lovely clothes of a pretty green colour, had taken her and four other girls in a car, away out where there were woods and streams and fields and birds and flowers; how they had had picnics by running water under trees, had called at cottages to see hens and ducks, had gathered buttercups in a meadow and kingcups by a pond; had come home in the evening at dusk, laden with the trophies of the countryside; and how some of these—beautiful big brown dried leaves of autumn, and twigs with growing green buds—had been treasured for weeks in the poor home, reminders of one gloriously happy day.

Had Mary Devine really written the little story? Was she suddenly developing into a writer? Ruth had asked the question; her parents had asked it; her aunts had echoed it. There had been no hint of this in Mary’s earlier letters; they had been dull and uninteresting in the extreme. The one letter, the extraordinary letter, had indeed been as interesting as a story; everybody had said so. But—Mary an author? It was too astonishing to be believed. To be

sure, her father had been a journalist, and Ruth's mother remembered that as a child Mary had been reported to be "always trying to write stories;" but no one had heard anything of these for fifteen years. What had happened to Mary to make her begin again now? Was the article perhaps not written by her, after all? "M.D.D." might be somebody else. But then, why had it been sent? No, it must have been Mary.

Then, said Ruth slowly to herself, what great change had come over Mary during the last year? Why had she suddenly come to life? That was what the article seemed to suggest. Was it perhaps not a stodgy, dull Mary she was speeding to meet, after all; but—what? She did not know. Anything was possible in a Mary who wrote stories that were good enough to be published; a Mary who could write that strange fascinating letter about the new people and the new interests in her life. Could it be these new things and friends that had awakened her?

Ruth awoke to the fact that there were lights outside, that they seemed to be passing through an unbroken succession of towns and stations. And in ten minutes the journey should be over. Then these towns and stations were the beginning of London, and in ten minutes she would see Mary and some of her problems would be answered. How soon could she ask Mary if that article had really been hers?

As the train began to slow up, she leaned forward out of the carriage window, in eager excitement for the first sight of her perplexing, unknown cousin. Or cousins! Would Bidy perhaps come too?

## CHAPTER II

# BIDDY AT HOME

Ruth stood on the platform beside her suitcase, a little doubtful and forlorn. No Mary had appeared yet. Had she forgotten the time? Literary people had a way of being late for appointments, Ruth had heard. Perhaps Mary was absent-minded. Perhaps she was in the middle of another article, and Biddy did not like to interrupt her.

"I've got the address. I suppose if I take a taxi, I can drive all the way. I wonder how far it is? Everybody says London's very big!" she thought doubtfully, as she watched the hurrying crowds.

"Ruth! I know you're Ruth, by that snapshot you sent!" a merry voice hailed her.

Ruth whirled round, her face lighting up joyfully. "Oh! Is it Biddy?"

"Mary couldn't come; she'd made a promise for this evening before we knew when you'd arrive. It's her club night, you see. And I simply love stations, and meeting people, so I came instead. Boat trains are thrilling! I never met one before. Did all these people come on your ship? Do you know all of them? Which are your boxes? Come and find them! I've got a car waiting," Biddy remarked, with an obvious attempt to subdue the joyful importance of the announcement.

"That sounds jolly!" Ruth said with relief, and pointed out her luggage while she scanned her cousin eagerly.

Most of Biddy was hidden in a big coat buttoned up to her chin and a soft hat pulled down over one eye. She was sturdily built, not very tall; with brown eyes, and brown hair drawn back in a bunch of curls at the back of her neck, a merry smile, and a cheery matter-of-fact air. She was bossing the porters with a calm, businesslike manner which amused and impressed Ruth, whose vision of a crushed, downtrodden Biddy, needing cheering up and championing, had vanished into the fog that hung about the great station.

"I apologise for this!" Biddy laughed, as they followed the luggage up the platform. "It's not much of a fog, but it is a little attempt at one. It only got thick about four o'clock. Was there any down the line, or is it only for our special benefit?"

"I didn't notice it till we got here. Is that London fog?" Ruth asked, with eager interest. "I've heard of your fogs. How funny the lights look shining on it! But isn't it choky?" and she coughed.

"It isn't so bad up our way. We're down by the river here. I wonder how you'll like living right in town! The noise never stops; you won't sleep to-night, I expect. But you'll soon get used to it."

"I shall miss the movement of the boat; the screw, and the sea. It will feel queer to sleep in a bed that's quite steady. But I think I'll sleep to-night.—Biddy, what a jolly car!" Ruth was looking at the liveried chauffeur curiously. "It's a private car, not a taxi! London taxis aren't all like this, are they? Haven't you made a mistake?"

Biddy laughed. "Jump in. Frost will see to the luggage. He's a great friend of mine. Home, Frost! And thank you very much!"

"Have you stolen this motor?" Ruth asked severely.

"Yes, just for an hour. Well, it's been lent to me, or to you, rather. It's Jen Robins's car," Biddy condescended to explain. "She's awfully interested in you, and she wanted you to have

a jolly easy arrival in town. She's out with Mary this evening; at the club, you know. Jen called for Mary, and they drove to Islington together; then Jen sent Frost back to pick me up and take me to Waterloo to fetch you. When he's taken us home, he's going back to fetch Mary and Jen. It's just the topping kind of plan Jen loves to make. *She* said it was because she felt so guilty about letting Mary go to club and be out when you arrived; and so she had to do something to make up for it."

"That's the girl who took you to the big party?" Ruth asked wistfully. "Shall I see her? I've been hoping I should. Do you see much of her?"

"Oh, I *think* you'll see her soon!" Biddy promised. "She's one of the very best. But I'm not being polite! I meant to do things so properly. Did you have a pleasant voyage? How did you leave them all at home? How do you think you're going to like England? Do you find it very cold? What do you think of London?"

"I'll tell you in a few days! At present it seems chiefly yellow fog and smoke," Ruth retorted. "I'm deeply touched by London's welcome! It evidently knew I want to see everything and would be fearfully disappointed if I didn't have a real London fog, and so it's doing its best to satisfy me. I certainly never saw anything like it at home."

"Oh, this is nothing!" Biddy assured her airily. "But we're having to go slowly, of course. Frost spins along, as a rule."

"I love watching the people, and the lights. I'm glad we're going slowly. Tell him not to hurry, Biddy!"

"In a real fog you wouldn't see many people, or many lights. But this is a very crowded part. I don't know it at all," and Biddy gazed out also.

"Don't you know your way about London?" Ruth asked, in surprise. "But you've lived here for years, haven't you?"

Biddy's shout of laughter startled even Frost, who was used to her. "Not the *whole* of London! I know our own part. There are miles and miles of London I've never even seen. You haven't the foggiest notion how big it is!"

"I'm getting a very foggy notion of this part of it, anyway!" Ruth retorted. "I say, Biddy! Tell me one thing; it's the very first thing I want to ask! Did Mary write that article, signed 'M.D.D.'? It came the night before I left home. There was no letter or explanation with it."

"Which was it? What was it about?" Biddy assumed her casual tone of no importance again, but it was contradicted by the sudden gleam in her eyes and the pride in her flushed cheeks.

"Which? Have there been more? Has she written several?" Ruth asked eagerly. "Biddy, do tell me! I'm dying to know!"

"Lots! She's had five printed and paid for; and they've taken two more. And she's written others, some of them school stories that I helped her with. Two of those are taken, but they won't come out or be paid for till next Christmas; it's an age to wait! But one dear man took a Christmas story for next year and paid for it on the spot! Just think how we felt when Mary got a cheque for five guineas! We spent most of it right away; but you'll hear about that later!" Biddy fairly bubbled over with excitement. "And she's begun a book! She's only done about half of it so far, for the 'shorts' get paid for so much sooner, if they're taken; but she's doing it, and that's something. Isn't it simply ripping?"

"It's gorgeous!" Ruth said soberly, taking it in slowly. "But what made her begin doing it, Biddy? What started her? She hasn't been writing long, has she?"

"About six months. She's done jolly well in the time. Oh, I can't tell you! I've got ideas of my own about what started Mary on the downward track; well, I don't mean that, of course! I know what Mary would say; but you'd better ask her yourself. But it is ripping to have her doing it at last. I've always said she could; but she wouldn't try. And now she's going strong. Her stuff's good; they all say so. Which was it you read? We've sent them all out to you."

"It was about some very poor children's ride into the country in a car. Was it Jen who took them? Has she red hair?"

"No, yellow! Bobbed, in curls. It was Joy Shirley. Mary thinks all the world of them both. So do I, of course. Joy takes out cripples one day in every week. Mary got a guinea for that one, and she wanted Joy to take the whole of it to use for the children; she said it seemed only fair. But Joy and Jen simply wouldn't hear of it; they said it was the first money she'd made by writing, and she was to use it for herself. They were fearfully proud that she'd done it; and Joy was awfully bucked to be put in a story, and Jen pretended to be jealous. Of course, Mary had asked Joy's leave before she wrote the article."

"And what did she do with the money?"

"She said some of it must be used for the cripples. But Joy didn't need it; she's got tons. So Mary went to see the Pixie, who finds the children for Joy; and asked her to take some of it and use it for the cripples' play-hour at the big club in the East End. It seemed only fair."

"Oh, shall I see her? She came into that letter of Mary's. Is she still in London?" Ruth cried eagerly.

"She's going to be, after Christmas. Yes, you'll see her. We're nearly home; I know where I am now. I say! Did you see Frost's violets? I gave them to him. We're chums. Mary says he'll be asking me what my intentions are," Biddy said seriously. "I asked if I should put them in his buttonhole, and he said, 'Yes, thank you kindly, miss.' That was why I was late for your train. I was seeing to Frost's violets; I'd just thought of it. Now here we are. You jump out and go straight up and wait for me at the top. Go on till you can't go any higher. You don't mind stairs, do you? For there are several hundred here. Frost and I will see to your boxes, if you take the suitcase and rugs and hatbox."

"Let me help. You mustn't do it, Biddy," Ruth remonstrated, as Biddy and Frost took the handles of her steamer trunk.

"I'm a lot stronger than you. There's nothing of you!" Biddy retorted, and mounted the stairs sturdily.

"Thanks awfully, Frost!" she panted, at the top. "We'll lug it in ourselves. I think that's everything," and she produced her latchkey and threw open the door, and switched on the light. "Good-night! And thank you very much! I hope the fog isn't very bad between here and Islington!"

As Frost clattered down the long flights of bare stone steps, lit by the lamps outside, Ruth looked eagerly round at her new home. The entrance, the bare open doorway and stone passages and stairs, had seemed cheerless in the extreme; but these evidently led to somewhere that was "home" to Biddy, and Biddy was such a very cheerful person that she was not likely to be satisfied with an uncomfortable home.

Biddy was lighting the gas fire. "I couldn't leave it on. In this fog your train might have been an hour late. I'll put the kettle on. I say, I'm awfully sorry Mary had to be out. She'd have liked to be here to have everything ready for you. But it really was important; we'll tell you later. I'll do the best I can. Things are all ready; they won't take many minutes to heat up.

I'll have some hot water for you in a sec. Just help me haul your trunk inside, and then we'll shut out the fog and be cosy."

The fire was glowing red already. The table was laid for supper, the old crimson curtains were drawn across the windows. Ruth, looking round, felt at home at once. Allowing for the difference in climate, it was exactly the kind of room she had always been used to, and to which the luxury of the liner had seemed such a complete contrast. Everything was old and worn; there were bare spots in the carpet, the patterns of chairs and sofa coverings were almost rubbed away; the sofa, in fact, was hidden by a bright new rug, obviously to conceal its real condition. The big leather chair at one side of the fire was distinctly past its first youth; the big "humpy" footstool on the hearthrug was solid enough but evidently a relic of the past. The pictures and ornaments were old-fashioned; only the brown and yellow chrysanthemums on the table, and on the mantelpiece against the big mirror, were fresh and new. The room was quietly cosy and homelike; everything in it had a much-used look, though not necessarily ill-used. It was a room that had been lived in for years, and had originally been furnished from the relics of other homes; its atmosphere was restful and welcoming. But colour scheme—style—artistic effect—it had none; it was a jumble of treasures and comforts collected from other rooms in other homes, and brought here together with no attempt at arrangement or selection.

"It's not that we don't like having things all to match," Biddy said frankly, reading Ruth's look aright. "We'd love it. Mary's getting awfully keen on having jolly things round her; she never used to care. But we simply can't afford it yet. New wallpapers are a dream of the future, when Mary's book comes out. And carpets and cushions and curtains all toning in together would be gorgeous; but they're not for us, at present. We have to make things do, so long as they aren't actually falling to pieces."

"That's what I'm used to. I like your room. It's just like home," Ruth said warmly. "All our things are threadbare, and all our colours are jumbled. I've dreamed of colour schemes, too, but they haven't happened yet. Some day I'm going to have an all-blue bedroom—blue and silver."

Biddy chuckled. "Mary and I know just what we're going to have when the book comes out. We sit over the fire and plan the rooms. This one is to be green; we're so sick of red curtains! A green room, to remind us of the country, and to be a background for every kind of flowers; that's Mary's idea. This is your room!" and she brought a jug of hot water from the kettle on the gas-stove in the kitchen, and led Ruth to a room opening off the sitting-room. "It's not very big; our bedrooms are both small. If there isn't room for your trunk, it can stay out here and you can unpack by degrees. The room will hold you and a suitcase, anyway!"

Here again was the same mixture, the same air of comfort. The little room had a floral paper on the walls, of many colours; the carpet was green, the eiderdown pink. Then Ruth gasped and stared, at sight of the blue basin into which Biddy was pouring the hot water, for it seemed utterly out of place in the ordinary little room.

"Biddy! Where did you get such lovely things? These are all to match, anyway! You have been spending money! How did you manage it?"

"T'other kettle's boiling over!" and Biddy fled with a delighted laugh to the kitchen, overjoyed that her newest treasure had been admired at once.

Ruth bathed her face in the deep round basin, while she marvelled at its beauty; sheer beauty of simple generous lines and deep satisfying colour. The ewer was of the same rich blue, softening and deepening almost to black; and was as great a joy in its curves and low

squat shape and little open rim. There were round beautiful bowls for sponge and soap, with fascinating little grooves instead of handles; a tall, simply-curved jar for her toothbrush. On the mantelpiece were candlesticks and vases, all in the same rich wonderful blue, the same perfect lines and curves. It was a delight just to look at such simple beautiful ware, a continual joy to use it.

Ruth hastily combed out her wavy hair and changed her blouse for a white one; she shivered a little, and looked longingly at the green woolly coat she had worn under her ulster, then went out with it on her arm, and thankfully put it on when she saw that Biddy was wearing a red one.

“Biddy! Where did you get that lovely china? Tell me at once! Is that your room, by the way? You said ‘both our rooms.’ Have I turned you out?”

“Yes, of course, but I don’t mind. There’s room in Mary’s bed, and it’s warm to be two at this time of year. Come and have some supper! Will you have tea, coffee, or cocoa?”

“Oh, tea, please! I’m a real Colonial. Tea at any hour of the day or night.”

“And do you like fish? If you’d rather have eggs, I’ll scramble some for you; ’twon’t take long. We couldn’t tell which you’d like. Or will you have both?”

“The fish looks delicious, and I’m starving!” Ruth assured her. “Now tell me about that lovely china!”

“It’s pottery; hand-made village pottery. I’m so glad you like it. It’s my very newest treasure, the joy of my life,” Biddy said delightedly. “I’d have been awfully disappointed if you’d ignored it.”

“Nobody could. It’s so beautiful; but so different from everything else, Biddy!”

Biddy laughed. “Yes, the rest of the room doesn’t live up to it—yet. The pottery’s the beginning. Some day I shall have everything beautiful. The curtains are going to match the dishes, deep blue; and the bed will be the same blue. The walls are to be soft gray, and the carpet gray and blue.”

“It sounds pretty! You have it all planned out! But how did you get the china?—well, pottery, then! Where does it come from? Is it really hand-made?”

“Every bit of it, on a potter’s wheel. I’ve seen them doing it. It comes from a village in Surrey,” Biddy explained. “You must see Mary’s! But she’ll want to show you herself. Hers are a lovely deep rich brown, lined inside with old gold; and every here and there the brown runs over the edge into the gold in uneven splashes, like blobs of paint. She loves them; she always says she’s got a brown-and-yellow complex, and the very sight of her bedroom jug and basin sets it ramping! Her vases and bowls are all yellow inside, really prettier than mine; but I loved the blue, and I’d always wanted a blue room. But I shall have gray walls, because a room all in that blue would be too dark.”

“Yes, I think you’re right there,” Ruth found herself discussing the question as seriously as if the date of the papering had been fixed. “And you’d never match that blue in a wallpaper. Gray will be lighter and much daintier, and will show up the blue far better.”

“That’s what I thought,” Biddy agreed. “Mary’s going to have dull gold walls, or a soft light brown, a deep brown carpet and golden curtains.—Do you think we’re awful idiots?” she asked abruptly.

“Not a scrap! I love to hear about it. I can see how pretty your rooms will be. I’ll sit over the fire with you and plan mine too! But I am dying to hear how you managed to afford those lovely bedroom sets! Did Mary’s articles pay for them?”

“No, she wouldn’t have allowed that. We needed winter coats,” Bidly explained simply. “Oh, we didn’t buy them! They were Christmas presents. You’re the very first person, except me, to use mine. I’m so glad you felt you had to remark on them! I’ll tell you how it happened. They’re presents from Jen Robins. Yes, I know,” as Ruth exclaimed in astonishment. “She oughtn’t to have done it. We said so to her. But she can afford it, and she says she was dying to buy some of the ware and give it to some one who would appreciate it. She can’t have it herself at present, for she’s living in a furnished flat in town; awfully swish, and all that, but not like her own home. She can’t go changing the furniture! Her home’s in Yorkshire, but her father has to live in town for a while; he’s an invalid and needs special treatment. Jen was motoring with Joy Shirley from Joy’s home in Oxfordshire down into Sussex, to see Joan; Joan is Joy’s cousin, and she’s married. She’s had to keep rather quiet all autumn, so the others have had to go down to see her. Joy’s car broke down, and they were held up in a little town in Surrey; and there they found the factory where these lovely things were being made by hand. They both fell in love with them, but didn’t really need them, though Joy ordered some for the Hall on the spot. She’s very keen on handcraft work of all kinds, and wants to start some of these old industries in her village—weaving, and pottery-making, and so on. Jen heard Mary and me planning our rooms one night when she was here to supper; and she told us of the Surrey pottery, and gave us our choice, for Christmas presents, of new woolly coats or bedroom sets! She insisted that she’d been meaning to give us jolly sports’ coats or jumpers, and it wouldn’t cost any more; and she was aching to buy pottery, if we’d really like it. I simply fell on her neck; Mary was very shy about taking such good presents, but she came round. Jen’s so awfully bucked about the way Mary has come out of her shell in the last few months that she loves to do things for her. She says she gets so much fun out of the way Mary’s beginning to do things and care for things, that she feels she owes her a lot, and a few presents won’t begin to wipe it off! She motored us down to Farnham one Saturday to see the things being made and to choose our own. Of course, there was no need for her to give us vases and candlesticks and all kinds of little extras to match! But then she’s like that; we couldn’t stop her. She enjoyed the choosing as much as we did; and she came next day to gloat over the things!—But I’m not looking after you properly! You’re making me talk too much. Are you getting enough to eat?”

“I’ve been eating while you’ve been talking,” Ruth said laughing. “But, Bidly, I want you to tell me——”

“But you haven’t had any toast! I’ll make it for you to-night, and to-morrow you shall make your own,” and Bidly squatted on the big footstool with a fork and a slice of bread. “You know Jen’s name for this place? She calls it The House of Buttered Toast. She never invites herself to tea or supper, but always to A Slice of Buttered Toast. She says nobody eats as much toast as we do, or makes it as nicely. Mary says she’s going to paint a slice of toast on a sign, and hang it over the door; but I say a toasting-fork would be easier. There! Isn’t that an absolute poem?” and she waved the slice triumphantly before Ruth.

“An artistic triumph! Give it to me, Bidly! It makes my mouth water!”

“Cheers! You’re adopted! I’ll make some more.”

“But I want to know something,” Ruth said earnestly, as she buttered the toast. “You spoke of the way Mary had come out of her shell and was beginning to do things and care for things. What did you mean?”

“Just that,” Bidly’s face grew sober. “Everything’s different; a thousand times jollier. You can’t understand, of course. This place used to be horribly dull. Mary didn’t care about



anything; she used to sit alone here every evening, and darn stockings or go to sleep over the fire. I couldn't stand it, so I went out to the pictures every night, with a silly crowd from college. She wouldn't go herself, but she couldn't stop me going, though she said I went too often. But there was nothing else to do. She seemed awfully old and dull, and she wasn't interested in anything. I felt I couldn't stand years of it; I didn't fancy seeing myself grow old and dull too. I used to think I'd marry the first man who'd have me, and run away with him, just to get out of it!"

"And what happened?" Ruth had forgotten her toast, and Biddy's slice was burning. "Things are different now, Biddy?"

Biddy gave a shriek of horror at sight of her toast. "Look what you've made me do!—Different? As different as they can be. Mary came alive suddenly. I can't tell you what happened; I've never asked her. I didn't like to. But she's a different person, and *years* younger! We're awfully good friends now, and we're keen on all the same things. It began about the time we got to know Jen Robins. But what she did, or how she did it, is more than I can tell you.—There's Mary now! You'll see for yourself. Or at least there's Jenny-Wren outside; she's brought Mary home. That's Jen's pipe. Do you hear it? 'Laudnum Bunches'! She always plays that when she's excited about something. I wonder if it's you or——" and Biddy flung open the door.

High clear piping notes in a merry tune came from somewhere down the long staircase. Ruth rose, excited and eager. "What is it? How does she do it? Where are they?"

"The morris pipe. Are you coming up to see Ruth, 'Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son'?" and Biddy hung over the balustrade. "She wants to see you!"

## CHAPTER III

# MARY EXPLAINS

“Not to-night. Oh, what a smell of burnt toast!” a laughing voice called out of the darkness below.

“I’ve begged her to come in, but she won’t,” Mary was still two flights down but coming slowly up.

“Good-night! See you after Christmas!” and then the sound of the motor told Ruth that Jen had gone, much to her disappointment.

“Ruth, I apologise! I am so sorry I had to be out. Has Biddy explained?” Mary came in, dropping a pair of plimsolls into a corner. “Has she looked after you properly?”

“Biddy’s been splendid and has done everything for me. But I don’t think she happened to explain just where you were,” Ruth was eyeing her mysterious elder cousin curiously. “But she’s made me feel very much at home. I feel as if I’d been here for weeks!”

“Mary, have you passed?” burst out Biddy from the hearthrug, where she was making more toast.

Mary laughed, and threw her hat aside. “Passed with honours, I think. Jen’s really pleased. She meant it; she wasn’t putting it on. She says the children are dancing very nicely.”

“Cheers! Oh, good! You needn’t have been so nervy!”

“Of course, there were points to put right; little things I’d missed or misunderstood. I’ve done so little myself; I never realised how little till I began to teach. But Jen says their style is good, and they’re surprisingly free from faults and absolutely natural and unaffected. They *were* good to-night! They felt the importance of the occasion, I really believe, and rose to it. I felt myself that they were dancing well.”

“No wonder, after the lecture we gave them last week! I’m awfully glad, old thing! It will be a huge load off your mind!”

“Yes, I feel ready for a good time next week, now,” a touch of colour crept into Mary’s cheeks. She turned to Ruth. “Shall I go and change, or will you excuse me as I am? I’ve been teaching country-dancing, and I’m in my tunic. Do you mind?”

“Oh, she’ll excuse your legs!” Biddy laughed. “Don’t go and change at this time of night, Mary-Dorothy! Here’s a beautiful slice of toast just ready for you! You can’t go and dress now; it’s almost bedtime. She wouldn’t dream of it, if you weren’t here, Ruth!”

“Please don’t change for my sake!” Ruth said hastily, her eyes beginning to twinkle, however.

“Do you really wear gym. things, Mary? Oh, but how nice you look! How *neat*!”

Mary threw aside her big coat, and stood in her blue tunic and slim black legs. “We all wear them for classes; you have to for sword-dancing, if you’re to enjoy yourself at all. When I was asked to take on this children’s club and teach them once a week, the leader said she’d prefer it if I came in gym. things, as it looked more businesslike. So I felt I must do it. Anything was worth while that would make me look more like a real teacher!”

“Do you really teach dancing? But do you dance yourself?” Ruth was eyeing her in stunned astonishment.

“I try, just a little. Of course, I shall never be good,” Mary said simply. “I’m too stiff; though not nearly so stiff as I was! But I’ll never be a good dancer. Biddy’s going to be very

good.”

“You should see my capers!” Biddy said gravely. “And I’ve quite stopped pointing my toes. It took months; but Jen kept on at me, and I’ve reformed at last. Mary’s a lot better than she says, Ruth. Don’t listen to her. And she’s taught those kids awfully well. She’s been going to them on Fridays for six months, and to-night Jen went to see how they were getting on, and to criticise. That’s why it was so fearfully important, and Mary couldn’t come to meet you. And Jen says they’re really good; and she knows. Isn’t it ripping?”

“Congratulations, Mary! I *am* glad!” Ruth said warmly.

Mary laughed. “I was really very nervous! I’d have hated to feel Jen was disappointed. But she wasn’t; she really liked their dancing. You must come and see my children some night.”

“I shall want to, of course. But I want to see you dance yourself. When can I? Will you do something for me now?”

Mary coloured and laughed again. “No, I won’t! I’m nearly dead. But perhaps next week—have you told her about next week, Biddy?”

“No, I left you to break it to her. We’ve been talking all the time, but I don’t seem to have told her very much,” Biddy said ruefully.

“Oh, I think you told me heaps!”

“I’m beginning to be nervous as to what Biddy has told you!” Mary said suggestively.

“Well, she couldn’t wash in my basin without asking where I’d got such a topping thing. So I’ve been explaining how we’re going to re-decorate the house to match our bedroom jugs. She wants to see your brown pots.”

“I *do*! I love Biddy’s. But what is it about next week?”

“Are you sure you’ve had enough supper? Then come to the fire, and we’ll tell you.” Mary switched off the light, and they sat in the glow of the fire, Biddy curled up on the big stool, Ruth forced by the other two into the big chair, Mary stretched on the rug, leaning against Biddy and resting her tired limbs.

“We’re very glad to see you!” Mary began, and Ruth wondered what was coming. “But you’ve come at a queer time. You find us a preoccupied family! Our minds are full of one thing, and even your coming won’t interfere with it. We hope you’ll be interested; but even for you we can’t give up a thing we’ve looked forward to for so long and so keenly.”

Biddy gave a subdued chuckle. “Four days more! I couldn’t sleep last night; but I wasn’t thinking of you, Ruth!”

“Do tell me!” Ruth leaned forward and spoke in mock excitement to match their thrilled tones. “Is Biddy going to be married?”

“No, but we’re going to Chelsea!” Biddy proclaimed exuberantly. “*Much* more exciting than getting married!”

“It’s been the dream of our life,—for the last six months, anyway. Poor Ruth! It is a shame! I’ll explain,” Mary said kindly. “We’ve been going to classes in folk-dancing ever since last May, Ruth, and they’ve been the joy of our lives. But we don’t go to the official classes, which cost rather a lot for us. We go to a girls’ club, taught by Jen Robins; she’s taught us all we know. And we’re certain no classes could be jollier than hers.”

“And no one could be a better teacher!” Biddy interrupted loyally.

“But Jen keeps saying we ought to go to what she calls ‘proper classes.’ Every holidays there’s a special week or fortnight, when classes are held every day, and people come from all over the country to go to them. The Christmas School is always held in London, at the

Chelsea Polytechnic; and Jen has been teasing us to go to it. It costs a little, and at first we hardly felt we ought to do it. But when I got a little extra money, quite apart from my ordinary pay, the very first thing I decided to do with it was Chelsea.”

“Your articles!” Ruth cried eagerly. “Congrats, Mary! I’ve only read the first one so far, but Biddy has been telling me. I’m proud to be related to an authoress. You’ll let me see the others, won’t you? I hope you’ve kept copies?”

Mary flushed. “It’s rather fun,” she admitted. “Jen and Joy were so keen for me to try; they’re rather pleased I’ve had some published so soon. At first we had to use the money for clothes we were needing; but when I got a cheque for five guineas all at once, I went straight off and paid our fees for the Christmas School. I’ve a week’s leave from the office, and Biddy is having holidays. The School starts two days after Christmas, and we shall be there all day till evening. You’ll be able to do your sightseeing and shopping and so on, just as if we were at our ordinary work. I’m just afraid we may bore you by talking shop in the evenings! We shall be so full of it all. But we’ll try to subdue our excitement for your sake.”

“And be very kind to me! Please don’t trouble! Why shouldn’t I be interested too?”

“If she’s sensible, she’ll come to Chelsea and see it for herself,” said Biddy, from her perch on the stool in the dark. “Then she’ll be fascinated, too, and then she’ll understand and not think us crazy.”

“Can I come to watch? I’d love to see what your dancing’s like. And—oh, would I see all the people you talked about in your letter? The Pixie person? And will Jen be there? Is that what she meant by ‘after Christmas’?”

“That’s it. Everybody will be there!” Biddy said exuberantly. “Joy’s coming up to live in town for the week, and she’s bringing Ros and Maidie with her, and I shall see them every day. Rosamund’s my age and Maidlin’s fifteen, and it’s their first school, too. They’d planned to go to the summer one, but Maidie took measles at the end of the term and put them all in quarantine, so they had to give up the idea. They’re wild with excitement at the thought of coming to Chelsea, and having a week in London! You’ll like them, Ruth. You must come;—every day, if you like. Jen and Joy have been before, and they’ve told us heaps about it.”

“There’s folk-singing every morning, and a lecture at night; and there are demonstrations of the dances by the best dancers in the country,” Mary added.

“You’ll see Madam dance,” Biddy said joyfully. “I’m longing to see her dance again! She’s the teacher Joy and Jen like best, Ruth.”

“No, I’m afraid she won’t,” Mary remarked. “Madam isn’t coming to Chelsea. Jen told me so to-night.”

“*Not—coming?* But why not? They can’t have a school without her!” Biddy cried indignantly. “How can she bear to stay away? What’s the matter with her?”

“She’s sure to have a good reason. Perhaps she wants a rest,” Mary suggested, gazing into the fire. “Perhaps she doesn’t like Chelsea.”

“She was there last year! Joy said so. I think it’s just mean of her!” Biddy cried wrathfully. “I want to see her dance, and I want Ruth to see her! I don’t want to be in her class; I’d be scared of her! But I was looking forward to seeing her dance!”

“There are plenty of others,” Mary was taking Madam’s withdrawal more calmly. Jen was in Madam’s confidence, and had been definite about the reason. “You won’t see all the new friends we’ve made, I’m afraid, Ruth. Cicely Everett and Joan Raymond, the married ones, are both staying down in the country and don’t mean to come up to town at present. But you’ll like Joy and Jen. We felt a little guilty when we heard you would arrive before the week’s

school, for fear you'd be utterly bored; but we'd arranged it all by then and didn't want to draw back."

"Oh, but I don't think I shall be bored! I'm looking forward to it! I shall come as a visitor, and watch all your classes. I want to see you doing things in that tunic!"

Mary laughed. "Suppose I wash up in it, then! It's time we made a move. And I haven't asked a single question about your journey! Aren't you very tired?"

"Oh, I asked all that kind of thing!" Bidy sprang up to switch on the light.

"I'm going to help," and Ruth sprang up also. "Yes, you must let me, or I shan't feel I'm really one of the family!"

While she piled plates together and carried them to the kitchen, however, her eyes were constantly on Mary, a twinkle of amused appreciation in them. Mary was very slight and small, and her brown hair had here and there a gray thread, which looked oddly out of place beside the childish blue tunic which left her thin legs bare. She looked very neat and slim as she moved lightly about, and stood presently washing dishes at the sink.

"Are you very much amused? You look it!" she said, catching sight of the twinkle as she reached up to put a plate in the rack.

"I like it. It's very graceful, and must be awfully comfy. But I am surprised that you're such a sport, Mary! Where"—severely—"did you get that gray hair I can see? You're about seventeen, aren't you?"

"Undue concentration; mental effort. I've a bad habit of working on my nerves, and that's the visible result. My hair doesn't like it; it always rebels when I overwork. Oh, I don't need to do it! It's absurd; but I do it, all the same. It's just my way. I find the dancing a great relief. I get lost in the music, and it eases all the strain."

"It must be splendid for you!"

"I'm quite sure it is. I'm heaps better than I used to be. And I love teaching the club children, although I feel I know so very little myself. They're splendid 'copy' too. They talk, now they're used to me, and I get material for sketches and articles."

She was lifting down the clean plates from the rack to make way for those she was going to wash, and wiping each as she laid it down. Ruth watched her appreciatively. "Go on doing that! Reaching up, I mean. You don't know what a graceful position it is—in that gym. suit. It shows off your figure perfectly! And you *are* neat, Mary! But aren't you just rather thin?"

Mary laughed and coloured. "I always was; but I'm thinner now. And I'm not likely to get fat while I go on exercising at my present rate."

"Wait till you've seen morris jigs!" Bidy said darkly, as she filled hot water bottles.

"All this—this dancing, and these friends—must have made a great difference in your life, Mary," Ruth said tentatively, as she dried the spoons and forks. It seemed too early to ask all the questions that were in her mind; but she thought Mary might say something interesting if she were given an opening.

Mary's colour rose again, as she reached up with another dripping plate. "I'm happier than I've been for years," she said, in a low voice, as Bidy disappeared with a bottle in each hand. "It's the writing, of course; the feeling of being at work again, and doing work that has results. I don't say it's good work, but my things get printed and paid for, so they can't be too bad. I tried once before, but that was a failure. I was on the wrong lines. Now I won't be satisfied till I've held in my hands a book I've written myself. It will be my baby, and I'm longing for it. But I'm happy every day in the thought that I'm writing again. I used to dream; I wasted years. I'll tell you more of that later. Don't discuss it with Bidy; she doesn't know. But now

I'm alive, and at work, and we're both happier than we've ever been. And I owe it all—*all!*—to Jen Robins and Joy Shirley. For they made me dance; Jen simply dragged me in by main force the first time! I was terrified, and quite sure I could never do it. They made me start; and the dancing and the music—the exercise and the new life and new friends—stirred me all up till I had to write. I had to do something, to work off the excitement. That letter you spoke of was the first thing I wrote, the day after I'd danced for the first time, at the Pixie's children's party."

"That letter has been puzzling me for months!" Ruth exclaimed. "It puzzled us all. It seemed so unlike you! And you didn't say you had danced yourself. You only said you'd looked on."

"I didn't like to tell you. I thought you'd laugh. And I wasn't at all sure then that I was going on. It *was* unlike me; I felt that myself. I was beginning to wake up. But I don't think the dancing alone would have meant so much to me," Mary said thoughtfully. "It's the work, the writing, that I'm so happy about. If the dancing hadn't led to work, it might not have been satisfying. It was the thing that stirred me up to begin again; the work itself is the great joy!—Come into my room and see my 'brown pots,' as Biddy calls them!"—and she hung up her dishcloth and led the way.

"We never used to do anything new," she continued, as she stood fondling the fat generous brown ewer, while Ruth exclaimed at the depth and size and beautiful curves of the big golden bowl, the rich glossy brown of its outer side, the sensible grooves instead of handles. "Now we're always having new experiences. You must hear how we went to stay at the Hall with Joy; and about the Abbey! We've been several times. Biddy's absolutely devoted to the girls who live there—Rosamund and Maidlin, Joy's wards. The Chelsea School will be a new experience, too; that's partly why I'm so keen on it. Biddy's just thinking of the exciting time she'll have, of course. But it will be such a new feeling to be one of a huge crowd,—six hundred, they say!—all keen on the same thing. I never went to college; I left school early to do father's typing. I've only realised lately that I've missed something that most girls have. For years I was quite contented. I'm looking forward to the excitement of Chelsea, as I've heard of it from Jen and Joy, as something new and thrilling I've never known yet."

"I'm awfully glad you're going to have it! I hope you'll go every year," Ruth said warmly. "How lovely these things are, Mary!"

"They're all part of it; part of the new life I've come into," Mary laughed, a little uncertainly, as she took up a shining brown candlestick and turned it round and showed the gold inside the rim. "Colour, and beauty of shape and line! I've only just discovered them, and that it's a duty to have them, whenever possible. I never used to think it mattered. Anything would do. I wore navy blue because it was useful for the office; and was content with any old things at home. Then one day, when she felt she knew me well enough, Jen gave me a fearful rowing about the duty, as well as the joy, of wearing and surrounding ourselves with beautiful things and colours. It's almost a religion with her, and she let me have it hot and strong. We can't afford to do much yet, but we mean to, when we can. In the meantime, she says she sent these along as a first instalment and to keep us up to the mark. We shall certainly redecorate and re-furnish the flat to match them some day!"

"They're beautiful! I shall feel nervous of using Biddy's, though!"

Mary laughed. "Biddy vows she won't touch these; she'll use the bathroom! She says she'd shake with fear."

“I should drop them, from sheer fright,” Bidy said solemnly, from the doorway. “Ruth, are you using *both* our rooms? I’ve left mine for you, and here you are filling up Mary’s! There isn’t room in here for me till you come out. Oh, if Mary’s worshipping her pots and bowls, I can understand it!”

“I’m only gloating over them!” Mary laughed.

“I’m gloating too,” Ruth assured her. “Good-night, you beauties! Oh, I don’t mean Bidy and you! ‘Wake me early, mother dear,’ for I want Bidy to take me to see the Christmas shops!”

## CHAPTER IV

### RUTH'S CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

Ruth was using Biddy's peacock-blue basin with much enjoyment next morning, when the sound of music in the outer room made her pause and listen. It was not the clear silvery note of the morris pipe, which Jen Robins had played on the stairs the night before, but a lower deeper tone, yet undoubtedly a pipe, or whistle of some kind. She hastily finished dressing and hurried out, to find Mary putting on her hat before the mirror, while Biddy sat cross-legged on the "humpy" footstool, like a very sturdy Puck, and whistled "Rufty Tufty," her fingers playing swiftly over the six holes of a long yellow pipe.

"I couldn't do that!" Ruth said yearningly. "You're jolly clever, Biddy! Mary, you look ten years older in a skirt! You're quite dignified; I'm glad I saw you first without one."

"In her legs," said Biddy. "Oh, she couldn't go to the office all legs!"

"Must you go, Mary? It's so very nearly Christmas!"

"I've Christmas Eve as a holiday. But Biddy will look after you. It's holidays for her. Tell her what you want to do," and Mary said good-bye and hurried away.

"I want to hear that whistle again. I want to see Jen Robins and her pipe. I want to see the shops and buy things. I want to see London," Ruth proclaimed, as Biddy brought her porridge and eggs and coffee. "Is it still foggy?"

"No, quite decent. You can't see Jen. She's going off to Yorkshire to-day, for Christmas in their own home; but she's coming back for Chelsea. But the shops are there, and fearfully busy. And London's all right! We'll go out as soon as you like, when I've tidied up. Shall we meet Mary for lunch? I know where she goes."

"I'd love to. Will you help me to buy things?"

"I love buying things!" Biddy said warmly. "But I'm rather poor just now. I'm saving up for next week. I want to feel I can buy chocolates if I want them. Joy says the girls at Chelsea spend fortunes on chocolates and cigarettes. Do you smoke? Mary's asked me to wait till I'm twenty-one, and then I can do it if I like. She doesn't want to herself, though 'most everybody does nowadays. But she doesn't care about it; and I don't know that I do really, either. Of course, if she'd said I *must not* do it, I'd have wanted to begin right away! But when she put it that way, asking me to wait, to please her, I couldn't very well help saying I would. Mary's a jolly decent sort; I'd hate to worry her now. I used to; I used to be a little pig. But that was when we didn't understand one another. Now that we like the same kind of things, I do try to do what she wants."

Ruth, a little breathless with all this, intimated that she did not smoke; and asked again if she might hear the whistle once more.

"It's a dear!" Biddy said enthusiastically. "I've three. This is the black-and-gold gentleman, and he's the tenor. I've a little silver soprano boy, and a thin yellow alto lady; but I love the black-and-gold gentleman's tenor best. We've no piano, and we simply had to play the dances and songs somehow, so Jen lent us the music, and I soon found I could get some of the tunes on a whistle. I'll pipe while you're eating. Listen to 'Jamaica'! It fits rippingly. But 'Hunsdon House' is the most beautiful. Jen can't get it on her morris pipe; it goes too high. But I can do it on a whistle."

"What's the difference?" Ruth asked with interest, as she poured out her coffee.



“The pipe has only three holes; you can get eleven notes. I’ve six holes, and can get two octaves easily, and more. But the pipe is sweeter. And it’s much more distinguished! Much more *chic*! You only use your left hand; I have to use both.”

She sat cross-legged on the “humpy” and whistled tune after tune, and Ruth laughed and applauded and asked for more. But Bidy sprang up at last, throwing down the whistle, and brought the carpet sweeper.

“We must get out, or the shops will be too crowded! And we must leave the house decent.”

“I want them to be crowded! I want to see the Christmas crowds!”

“You will! Don’t worry!” Bidy said briefly.

“Had enough of crowds?” she inquired, as they struggled out of the mob in a big Oxford Street shop.

Ruth laughed breathlessly. “I began to think we’d never get out alive! It *is* true! There are more people in London than anywhere else in the world! And I’ve seen them at last. They were all—*all!*—inside that one shop!”

“You’ll find a few left in Selfridge’s!” Bidy mocked.

“Bidy, will you help me with some shopping?” Ruth asked earnestly, when they had lunched with Mary, and were entering the fray again.

“Try me! I’m first-class at that! But you can’t send home Christmas presents now?”

“I know that. Come along and do as you’re told.”

Bidy followed meekly, and after a severe struggle with the rest of London’s population, found herself actually near a counter where knitted coats and jumpers were for sale.

“But you’ve got a jolly green one, Ruth!” she remonstrated. “There’s nothing whatever wrong with it. I only wish mine was half as nice!”

“It’s not for me. It’s for Mary,” Ruth said briefly. “What colour would she like?”

“For Mary?” Bidy gaped at her. “Ruth, you mustn’t—she won’t let you—you can’t——”

“I’ll see to that! Your job is to help me to choose the right colour.”

“But, Ruth!——”

“Would she like yellow? Don’t waste time, Bidy. It’s Christmas, and everybody is busy. They can’t wait all night while we argue. I looked at Mary’s sports’ coat this morning, and it’s badly faded. It’s time she had a new one.”

“She hates that old blue coat! But it isn’t worn out, so——”

“So she’s making it do. I’m going to see that she has a pretty new one to wear at the dancing school. See? Now don’t argue. I’ve plenty of money, you silly kid. I’ve been saving up for this trip for ages. Now shall we dress Mary in yellow, or brown?—no, something brighter than brown? Help me, Bidy!” Ruth’s tone was peremptory.

“She’s dying for an amethyst coat!” Bidy burst out. “She goes and gazes at them in the shop windows! She loves brown, or violet, or amethyst to wear.—Oh! But that one’s far too good, Ruth! I meant just a little one!”

“We’ll have that one,” Ruth’s tone was final. “It will suit her. Now what about you? Blue?”

Bidy gazed at her, awestruck. “Ruth, are you a millionairess in disguise? Have you found a gold mine?”

“No, diamonds! South African diamonds, my child! Which coat is it you’re dying for? Your old red one is very shabby, let me tell you. I’m afraid they haven’t one of your particular blue. Shall we try somewhere else?”

Biddy's incredulous eyes roved over the colours before her. "Oh, I don't want to wear blue! It's not my colour, though I love it for a room. Oh, Ruth! That rust-red! I've been wanting it for years!"

Ruth laughed. "You'll look very jolly in it. I like your choice. Right! We'll have those two."

"I think we'd better go home before you spend any more money," Biddy murmured rapturously, as she clasped the bundle to her breast. "Have you got your ticket back to Cape Town?"

"Oh, father and mother are coming to take me home! Take me to see more shops, Biddy! I love the crowds, and the feeling that everybody's buying presents for somebody!"

"I'm frightened of what Mary will say!" Biddy said, as they climbed the long flights of stairs wearily.

"I'll manage Mary! We'll make her plates of buttered toast, drown her in it, make her drunk with it!"

"She won't be able to say anything when she sees that lovely coat! She was more sick of her old one than you'd believe. And you've paid your own expenses all day! She won't like it, Ruth."

"I'm going to make her let me pay for my lunch too.—And if she says a word against it," and Ruth leaned over the rail at the stairhead and addressed the darkness below, in which she had heard Mary's step, "I'm going right off to-morrow to the Gordons in Devonshire, and I shan't see any more of London, or go to Chelsea, or meet Jen Robins and the Pixie, or see the Tower or Westminster Abbey, or anything, and I shall be just fearfully disappointed, that's all!"

"Goodness, what's the matter? What has Biddy been doing?" and Mary followed them into the room.

Biddy flew to put the kettle on. "Giving Ruth her own way in everything. Mary, you've no idea what she's like! She's a fearfully strong-willed person. I'm sure she'll bully you!"

"I'm sure she will. Nobody could call me strong-willed! What dreadful things has she been doing, Biddy? Will it be in all the papers to-morrow?"

"She's paid all her own bus fares, and mine, too, sometimes. She wants to pay for her lunch. And—look!" and Biddy tore open the parcel and, before Mary's bewildered eyes, put on her rust-red coat and held up the pretty amethyst jacket.

"I couldn't resist them, Mary," Ruth's tone was apologetic. "And the bus fares only came to tenpence!"

Mary looked at the amethyst coat and then at her. There was that in her look which made Ruth go to her quickly and put her arms round her, and say, speaking hurriedly, "Mary, I didn't mean to tell you yet. Father left it to my judgment to tell you or not, as I thought best. But I can't go on living with you and taking kindness from you, and not be honest. Mary, we've heaps of money. It's all happened within the last few months. They've found diamonds on the farm, on our land; and father's sold the land, partly for a big sum and partly for shares in the mining company that's been formed to work it. He's only kept the house, because he has to live in South Africa, and we all love the place. We aren't farmers any more; and we're going to travel; and we can have things if we want them, and we can give things to our friends. Perhaps that's best of all. I'm starting with you and Biddy. It was simply topping, the way you wrote to welcome me and said you'd give me a home and a good time. I could pay to go to a hotel, but I'd far rather be with my own people. You've been kinder than kind, giving me your

own beds and all; and you've made me feel as if I'd been here always. I love you both; and what are two knitted coats, anyway? You're to let me give you other things too, later on. But these are Christmas presents; so that you'll look jolly and festive at Chelsea, Mary!"

"A millionairess in *our* family!" Biddy whispered, in awestricken tones.

"It's not so bad as all that," Ruth assured her. "Mary, do you like your coat? If not, we'll make them change it to-morrow."

"Oh, it's beautiful! Just the colour I love to wear! But, Ruth, I am glad!—for your mother and father and his sisters! We've often said what a hard life it was for them, to be farming out in those wild places. We wished they could come home and live more comfortably. This will make things easy for them. I am so glad!"

"And you'll let me pay my own bus fares?" Ruth pleaded, laughter in her eyes.

"You shall pay mine, too!" Biddy proclaimed enthusiastically.

"I will! And you'll come to the theatre with me?" Ruth begged. "I can't go alone. If you'll take me to Chelsea, I'll take you to the theatre!"

"We'll go out to-morrow morning, and see what seats we can get for Boxing Day!" Biddy assured her gleefully.

"It's as good as a story!" Mary said fervently, and threw off her hat and wraps and tried on the amethyst coat before Ruth's delighted eyes.

## CHAPTER V

### NINE-THIRTY AT CHELSEA

“And now the fun begins!” Biddy proclaimed excitedly. “Your quiet Christmas is over, Ruth!”

“It didn’t strike me as so frightfully quiet!” Ruth retorted. “Christmas music in the Abbey with you, while Mary cooked a real English Christmas dinner; the theatre for us all on Boxing Day, and a lot of running round London seeing things I ought to see; and yesterday, you so excited at the nearness of Chelsea that Mary had to beg me to take you to the pictures, so that she’d get rid of you for a couple of hours and be able to type and send off an article! I feel we’ve done fairly well!”

“Christmas is a time you have to spend with your own family. You can’t ask people to come and see you, because they’re all with their families, too,” Mary remarked.

“And so I’ve been jolly lucky to have you two to run about London with! Christmas in a hotel doesn’t appeal to me at all. I’ve had just what I wanted,” Ruth assured her. “And if you’re full of your dancing and your own friends for the next week, I’ll forgive you. I quite understand what a great occasion it is!”

“I don’t think you can, quite. But you may do by to-night,” Mary told her, laughing.

“Haven’t I seen Biddy’s crescendo of excitement ever since Christmas Eve? Haven’t I seen yours, though you’re so quiet about it? Your eyes are shiny and your cheeks are burning, just because it’s so thrilling to have breakfast in your tunic instead of wearing proper clothes and going off to the office!” Ruth mocked.

“Well, it is a little more exciting than the office!” Mary pleaded, and hurriedly cleared the table. “We’ll wash up at night. That’s exciting, too, and forbidden as a rule. If we once began leaving dirty dishes about, we’d soon not be able to get into the scullery. But—nine-thirty at Chelsea!”

“It’s quite a good excuse!” Ruth agreed.

“Chelsea! Oh, cheers!” and Biddy checked herself in the very act of turning a somersault. “No, I won’t. I’d have to do my hair again. I must be decent. I can’t have Ros and Maidie saying I look a fright!”

“Shoes—ticket—money—handkerchiefs; I’m ready!” Mary announced.

“Why, how many handkerchiefs do you need? What are you going to do? Weep?” Ruth teased.

“You’ll see presently, dear,” Biddy said kindly.

Ruth did see before long, when a class of thirty stood ranged in a small hall, every girl with a big handkerchief in each hand. Intensely interested, Ruth sat in a corner to watch. She was bewildered, too, however, for Mary had spoken of six hundred students; here were only thirty, and the hall would obviously not hold any more for dancing. It was a Boy Scouts’ hall, and the walls held weird symbolic trophies, totem signs, and photographs of camping and sporting events, while the room was decorated with strings of flags and pennons, the remains of Christmas festivities.

The students were mostly girls, who all wore tunics; there were two men in flannels, who looked lonely, and brightened up appreciably when two more appeared. Ruth knew it was a “Grade II.” class, though what that implied she did not know. She watched the revision of

“Blue-Eyed Stranger,” with amazed interest in the morris movements, and stared incredulously at Mary when she found the amount of energy this dancing demanded.

The class came to grief at once in its “one-hop, one-hop, step, and jump,” and the sets were ruthlessly broken up and bidden to make a big ring and practise steps. The teacher was full of energy and lost no time; her orders and criticisms were emphatic; Ruth laughed as Mary and Bidly came in for attention, but saw they had quite forgotten her.

Already, in this first class, they had found friends, though they had told Ruth they knew no one who would be there. At sight of some one all in brown, tunic and coat and shoes, Mary had turned in astonishment to Bidly—“There’s that Writing Person! But how weird! She can’t be in this grade!”—and when a moment’s interval came for rest, she went to ask the explanation.

“You were in the advanced class, with Jen Robins and Joy Shirley, when I saw you first!” she remonstrated. “Grade VII., at least!”

“Yes, but keep quiet about it!” and the Writing Person’s eyes laughed behind her glasses. “I don’t want any one to know. My ‘step-and-jump’ is quite bad; it always has been. It’s worth a week to try to get it right. I’m really here because I’ve a friend whose first School it is; I promised to go into classes with her. That long child over there, making friends with your sister, is with me. She’s one of my Camp Fire Girls; we’ve come together. She and your Bidly are the only two youngsters; that’s quite enough introduction!”

Mary looked at the tall brown-eyed schoolgirl, in a very short blue tunic and very long thin legs, and a long dark plait, who had swung herself up on to the vaulting-horse and invited Bidly up too. “How jolly for her to come! And how nice of you to give up your own classes to be with her!”

“Oh, but it isn’t. I’m enjoying this. I love being in a class where I know the work and don’t have to worry. As a matter of fact, I skipped Grade II; I had a strained muscle and had to give up Headington dances at one time. It’s dogged my career at every step. As soon as the Advanced crowd begin on ‘Laudnum Bunches,’ I go to pieces. So I’ve come back to learn it properly. And I’ve always been in trouble for my step-and-jump; out of time, you know.”

Mary nodded, laughing. “Mine’s bad, too. But I never expect to be really good at morris. I’m glad I’ve begun it, though, and that was partly due to you. Do you remember telling me I ought to try?”

“You looked on so longingly. Have you seen Joy Shirley yet? Heard the news? Oh, then, I won’t tell you! I couldn’t spoil it for her. I met her just now, outside the Polytechnic, and she had to tell somebody. You’ll hear before long!”

“How unkind of you!” Mary said, laughing, but did not look particularly troubled at being kept in suspense.

“How is your book getting on?”

Mary flushed. “How nice of you to remember! I’m working at it. I think I’ve done about half, but I can’t quite tell.”

“Of course not. But don’t make it too long, you know. It’s easier to lengthen than to cut down; at least, I think so! And much pleasanter! It’s horrible to have to cut your work to pieces. I once cut out fifteen thousand words. I felt very bad about it, at the time; but I believe the result was good.”

“Oh, it would be awful to have to do that!” Mary cried.

“Don’t let yours run away with you, or perhaps you’ll have to do it, too! Now we must go and do some more ‘step-and-jump.’”

The end of the hour came surprisingly soon, and Mary and Biddy tossed their handkerchiefs to Ruth to be folded neatly, and plunged into the noisy crowded dressing-room to find their coats and shoes.

“Joy’s here, and she’s got something to tell us,” Mary told Biddy, as they hurried down the dark vaulted stone passage together. “So Ros and Maidie must be somewhere, too, unless Maidie’s got measles again.”

“That’s the Poly., Ruth; that huge building! There *are* a few people about, aren’t there?” Biddy laughed exuberantly, as they turned into Manresa Road, and saw girls and men approaching the great doorway from every direction.

The entrance steps and porch and vestibule were crowded with excited girls in tunics and dancing shoes, all greeting friends they had not seen for months. The Writer and her schoolgirl entered in front of Mary and Biddy, the tall girl’s eager eyes taking in everything; she was obviously as ready for the new experience as Mary herself. They met friends at once, and joined some girls met in the London classes.

With a shriek of joy, which drew amused glances in her direction, Biddy hurled herself on two schoolgirls, and Ruth looked eagerly to see the beloved “Ros and Maidie,” of whom she had heard so much. Rosamund was fair, with two long yellow pigtails, and wore a bright green knitted coat over her blue tunic; Maidlin, half Italian, was very dark, with shadowy eyes and dusky hair, a vivid study in contrasts, with her lemon-coloured coat. They fell on Biddy also, and one more excited group was added to the crowd in the noisy corridor. It was a time of meetings, and no one who had found long-lost friends took any notice of any one else whatever.

“I say, Mary-Dorothy! Have you heard?” a tall girl with bright bronze hair and a masterful manner accosted Mary.

“Mary-Dorothy, I’m a godmother once and perhaps twice over,” was the cryptic greeting of a still taller girl, with bobbed yellow curls and laughing face.

Ruth knew who they must be, and gazed at them critically. But they had no eyes for her, but cared only to see the effect of their news on “Mary-Dorothy,” as they seemed to call Mary.

“We’ve had twins!” Joy proclaimed dramatically, to the joy of the crowd, whose jeers she ignored. “Well, almost twins; next thing to it, anyway. Joan and Cicely, you know. Joan had a daughter on Christmas Day; wasn’t it nice of her? A topping Christmas present for the Abbey!”

“It’s a very little Abbey-Girl as yet,” Jen said happily. “But I’m sure she’ll be a nice one! Joy says she’s the image of her Auntie Joy;—*and* of Joan, of course!”

“And then the President went one better by going and having a boy on Boxing Day!” Joy grumbled. “*We* wanted a boy! *I* did, anyway! Jack and Joan seem quite pleased with Janetta, but I wanted an Abbey boy for a change. Just like the President! She always did want the whole earth; and got it!”

“I’m so glad! I do congratulate you both!—and the mothers and fathers too, of course!” Mary said earnestly.

“Help! Isn’t it weird to think of any one calling old Joan ‘mother’?” Joy said wonderingly.

“We haven’t seen Cicely’s baby yet, of course,”—Rosamund had been telling the news to Biddy—“but Joy motored us down to see Janetta yesterday, on our way to town. She’s sweet! Only *this* size, of course; but she’s all there, all the bits of her. Somehow it seems funny for her to have toes and things so soon. You’d expect them to grow by degrees.”

"I'm glad one's a boy. They'll be partners," Biddy was taking long views of life. "Is Joan's really to be called Janetta?"

"After me. I've arranged that," Jen said calmly. "I'm her godmother, of course. I'm willing to be a godmother for Cicely, too, if she asks me; I don't mind obliging her in a little thing like that. But I couldn't allow any one else to be godmother to Joan's kid. Joan may go and call her something else, of course, though she'd promised to call her first daughter after me. But I must say I'll be surprised if the child isn't Janetta! I'm glad she's a girl. I'd much rather have goddaughters than godsons; much easier to bring up, I assure you!"

"You having had so much experience!" Joy laughed. "I'm glad the Abbey twins have arrived; they may comfort their respective mas for having to miss this year's School! Cicely and Joan were here with us, and not even married, this time last year! *Isn't* it funny, the way things happen?"

"Come down and take your hat off, Mary-Dorothy!" Jen commanded, and led the way down to the basement and through white corridors, to long ranges of cloakrooms, busy with happy excited girls. Biddy was already there with her companions, wondering at the size of the building, hopelessly lost in its mazes.

"Don't go and leave me!" she implored. "I shall never get out again! You'll come back next year and find me still wandering about those passages looking for the way out."

"You can always ask the way to the front door and start from there," Jen said helpfully. "That's what I mean to do. It's rather like an ant-heap, isn't it? I say! Isn't it *fun* being one of a huge crowd?"

"Every modern convenience!" Joy said proudly, as if she owned the building. "Yes, it does take some time to know your way about. The real test is whether you can find the door to the room across the yard; or get from the art rooms at the top to the downstairs gym. without any unnecessary steps. *I can't!* I always wander half a mile out of my way, and find myself on the wrong side of the building. The one place I can find is the refreshment room."

"I feel I may never see my hat and coat again," Mary said mournfully. "But perhaps you'll be very kind and bring me back to them."

Ruth had followed, and was listening and laughing at the chatter. A simultaneous shriek from Rosamund and Jen startled her, but Jen's was more emphatic because charged with wrath, while Rosamund's was merely surprise and delight.

"Biddy, what a jolly jacket!" as Biddy hung up her big coat.

"Mary-Dorothy, where did you get that lovely coat? I thought you'd be wearing your old one. Here am I, with a beautiful violet coat new this Christmas, wearing my old blue jumper because I didn't want to swank in a new one, and you said you'd only got your old one to wear; and here are you doing the swanking, in a simply lovely new one!" Jen's voice rose in growing indignation. "Well, I do call that a mean trick! I'm going right home to get my new one!"

"Do! You'll miss all the rest of the morning," Joy advised.

"I'm very sorry," Mary said, laughing. "I had no idea so much depended on what I wore! But how nice of you, Jenny-Wren!"

"Where did you get it?" Jen demanded. "It's the coat I meant to give you, and you chose brown-and-gold pottery instead! Have you pawned the pots?"

"I'm enjoying them more every time I use them! We've a kind cousin staying with us. Ruth, I forgot all about you! I'm sorry! But we told you how it would be."

"You gave me fair warning. But I stuck to you for fear I'd never see you again."

“We must hurry or we’ll never get seats upstairs,” Joy urged, when the introductions were over. “Are you children ready? Then follow the crowd, and we’ll come to the big hall!”

“If we can’t get seats, we’ll sit on the floor,” Rosamund said happily. “Nobody minds a little thing like that!”



## CHAPTER VI

### A BLOW FOR MARY

The big gym. of the Chelsea Polytechnic was even more of an ant-heap than the dressing-rooms, and a very much disturbed ant-heap at that. The whole six hundred students were gathered there, all excited, all happy, all looking for friends or greeting them eagerly. The noise was deafening; Ruth, bewildered but intensely interested, kept close to Mary and watched. Girls hung over the edge of the gallery to wave to friends just discovered below; girls on the window-sills called greetings to others who had climbed up on the ladders and bars of the gymnastic apparatus; girls ran about looking for chairs or song-books.

Some one began to clap, and the hall rang with the welcome of six hundred folk-dancers to their chief. The white-haired Director appeared on the platform and smilingly acknowledged the greeting. He struck a chord on the piano, and silence fell; he announced, "Number One," and began to play a rippling accompaniment.

"*How they sing!*" Ruth murmured. "Oh, I love this part of it! And what pretty songs! And how beautifully he accompanies! Mary, is it all new to you too?"

Mary nodded, but did not try to speak. The new experience had her in its grip; she was in a happy dream. For months the tunes of those songs brought back with a rush the whole feeling of that first morning; the tense atmosphere of excitement, enjoyment, expectation, enthusiasm, realisation by the whole crowd of a moment looked forward to for weeks.

The half-hour's singing was all too short. The Director gave out a few notices, and particularly cautioned newcomers against too hard work in the first few days—"I say this at every School, but nobody ever listens to me!"

"Old dear!" Joy murmured. "He does try to take care of us! Who minds being a little stiff to-morrow?"

"You don't want not to be able to go downstairs at all, though," Jen said cautiously. "You know nearly everybody, don't you, Mary-Dorothy? All the Staff people? He's our Prophet"—she leaned across to Ruth. "We all love him! Cicely calls him the Prophet; and there's his Joshua—his assistant, you know! We're to have Mrs. Joshua for country-dancing; I don't know what she'll be like. I've never had her before. Jump, Mary-Dorothy! The avalanche is beginning!"

The Prophet's tall young assistant had come to help to clear the floor. The ant-heap was in movement again; floor-space was appearing as if by magic, and the crowd was packing itself densely round the walls, while those in the gallery and on the platform looked on with comfortable superiority. Ruth found herself somehow sitting on the very dusty floor in front of the first row of chairs, while six dancers in blue or brown tunics and carrying handkerchiefs came out to dance "Laudnum Bunches."

"Who's that in Madam's place?" Joy whispered jealously. "Isn't it rotten without her? Who is she?"

"Don't know her name," Biddy said in reply. "But she's teaching us morris. She's a hustler!"

"I miss Madam!" Jen murmured sadly. "She's a rotter! Bother—oh, well!"

Joy laughed. "I second that, Jenny-Wren! We're all missing her 'something fearful.' But you must let her arrange these little things as she thinks best."

“She won’t be back all next term, either.”

“Sure she won’t!” Joy seemed to have no doubt of it.

“Which is the one you call the Pixie, Mary?” Ruth drew a long breath at the end of the dance. “Yes, Biddy, if that’s what it ought to look like, you *aren’t* good yet!”

“Oh, we all feel crushed during demonstrations!” Jen informed her.

“There, on the edge of the platform at this end—in a pretty yellow coat—beside the tall girl in lighter blue, and the jolly dark one in the coat like Biddy’s. They’re having to tuck their feet up, or they’d kick those men in the front row, just under them.”

“Shall we speak to her?” Ruth looked curiously at the little person of whom she had heard so much.

The Pixie’s eyes fell on Joy and Jen at that moment, and her face lit up in a smile of eager greeting. She waved her hand. “Come and speak to me afterwards!”—then subsided, as the men came out carrying long sticks, to dance the Adderbury “Constant Billy.”

“I could go on watching this for ever!” Ruth murmured at the end. “But I’m sure they couldn’t go on dancing for ever! I never saw anything more exciting in my life! But fancy dancing being so thrilling!”

“It’s so full of life and strength and meaning,” Mary said soberly. “We saw a lot of it last summer, at the week’s festival. It’s very English; you wouldn’t expect us to have evolved a dreamy or a stately dance, as France or Spain might do.”

“I never thought of that. Yes, it is English!” Ruth conceded. “But it is for men, Mary! Why do you people try to do it?”

“Because we can’t help it,” Mary said feebly.

“Because it’s such topping fun to do!” Jen told Ruth promptly. “Do you suppose it would have been kept up all these centuries if it hadn’t been? I simply love doing morris; we all do!”

The country-dances appealed to Ruth as much as the morris, and seemed to her far more possible. She watched “Newcastle,” “Parson’s,” “Boatman,” and “Mr. Beveridge’s Maggot” with keen delight; then the Director rose from the piano and made a sweeping gesture with his hands; and in a moment the big hall was in wild confusion again,—girls running to the doors, climbing over chairs, jumping down from window-sills, rushing after friends, seizing others by the arms with excited greetings—“How are you, old thing? I haven’t seen you since August!”—“So you’ve turned up again! I say, what grade are you in?”—“Meet me after the lecture for tea!”—“Right-o! I want to hear how you’re getting on!”—“I say, congrats!” to a friend wearing a silver badge. “When did you get it? I hadn’t heard!”

The Pixie leaned over the edge of the platform to speak to the Abbey crowd. “I say, I’ve got to go and find a man. I know he’s here somewhere. Meet me in this room after lunch, will you? And we’ll have a real good chat. I *am* so glad to see you here!” to Mary. “Are you enjoying it? I *hope* you’re enjoying yourself! And how are you?” to Rosamund and Maidlin, who were eyeing her eagerly from the background. “Isn’t it fun? You haven’t got measles now, have you?” to Maidlin. “I say, I must run or I shall never catch him! He was in my classes years ago, and I saw him during the singing. Good-bye!” and she was off.

“A Vacation School is *not* the place to talk to the Pixie!” Joy said solemnly. “She knows a thousand and one people, and they’re all here, and they all want to see her. If we get one good talk with her we’ll be lucky.”

“If we don’t, we’ll go and see her at the shop afterwards,” Jen remarked. “Now what about coffee?” and they pushed their way in a crowd into the still bigger crowd surging in and out of the refreshment room.

“I feel rather dishevelled but triumphant!” Jen said proudly, when she, Joy, and Rosamund emerged from the queue around the counter with two cups of coffee each and piles of biscuits in the saucers. “I haven’t spilt more than half of mine! Mary-Dorothy, these are for you and your cousin. Sit down on those desks and enjoy it, and don’t argue. Biddy’s getting her own and Joy’s got mine, and Ros is seeing to Maidie; and there you are! I can’t have you struggling in that mob. You’re still tired after your morris,” she said severely. “You need looking after.”

“Biddy, have you heard Jen’s gorgeous plan for next term?” Rosamund cried, above the clatter of cups and voices, as Biddy appeared with her cup of coffee.

“I’ll tell them,” said Jen, perched on the lid of a desk, swinging her long legs. “Mary-Dorothy, I’ve got to give up that club. Their gym. leader is coming back, so they don’t need me any more; I only took them on for six months, you know. You’ll have to go to real proper classes; for, of course, you can’t stop now! But as you’re now a famous authoress you can afford it. I’m not going to be in London all spring.”

“Not—in London?” Mary looked at her with such blank dismay in her face that Jen’s heart smote her suddenly. She had never realised till that moment how much she had counted for in Mary’s new life. Some of the joy in her plan left her abruptly. She had not thought of Mary’s point of view till then.

Mary put down her cup and stared at her. She, too, had not realised how she depended on Jen’s help, on her visits, on the constant sight of her at classes. She felt this blow far more keenly than the temporary loss of Madam from folk-dance circles. It was as if Hyde Park or St. Paul’s had suddenly announced it was leaving London. The centre of everything would be gone if Jen were not in town.

Jen read something of this in her startled, frightened face; but not all, for she could not know how much she had meant to Mary. She saw that she had unknowingly dealt her a severe blow, however.

She said swiftly, “You’ll have your cousin. You’re going to be very busy with her. She’ll keep you lively. Won’t you?” to Ruth.

Ruth had been watching Mary. Forgotten time after time, she had had plenty of chances of watching, and even in this first hour one fact had been forced upon her.

“What a lot Mary thinks of these two, Jen and Joy! She hardly takes her eyes off them. I wonder if they’re good enough? She worships the ground they tread on! They don’t know it, but she thinks the world of them. It is queer, when they’re so much younger. Of course, they’re very jolly; and very fascinating when you know them, I’m sure. But—I wonder! I’ll have to wait and see.”

“Oh, I’ll keep her busy! She’ll have heaps to do, looking after me,” she said promptly. “Are you going home to Yorkshire again?”

Mary looked up, pulling herself together hastily, conscious that she might have betrayed too much.

“Is your father so much better? Doesn’t he need to live in London now?”

“He isn’t better,” Jen said, her happy face clouding. “He’s to go to Paris for special treatment for three months. And I can’t live in London all alone, Mary-Dorothy!”

“Aren’t you going too?”

“My sister-in-law from Glasgow is going with them. They meant me to go, too; but they don’t need me, and I’m not keen on Paris. So I’m going to stay at home and go to school again.”

“Jenny-Wren! You’re grown-up!”

“Since when?” Jen demanded indignantly. “I’m only nineteen! Do I look grown-up?”

“Not at this moment, certainly,” Ruth said, laughing.

“That’s only her tunic. She’s *quite* grown-up!” Biddy insisted, listening round-eyed. “They won’t have you at any school, Jen!”

“Oh, won’t they! I’m going back to Wycombe with Ros and Maidie. Miss Macey’s delighted to have me,” Jen said haughtily.

“Really?” Mary, her heart like lead, felt she must say something. “You’ll live with Joy at the Abbey, of course. How jolly for you!”

“They’re starting a special Domestic Science course at Wycombe,” Jen condescended to explain. “I’m going to learn how to put on patches, and all about washing-up, and upholstering furniture; and cooking and dressmaking and hygiene, of course!”

“You won’t learn all that in one term!” Joy jeered.

“We’ll teach you how to wash up, if you’ll come and stay with us,” Biddy suggested.

“Ros says Nesta and Molly and others of my old crowd are going to take the new course,” Jen explained. “Some of them have only just left, or haven’t left yet. I had to go home when I was sixteen, you know. Mother’s always been sorry, but she needed me. But she says now if I care to go back for a term, I may. And I jolly well do! It’s ripping just to think of it!”

“If you’ll stop all summer, we’ll make you the new Queen, Jen,” Rosamund, the reigning May Queen, promised wistfully.

“You won’t need a Maypole if you make Jen the Queen!” Joy mocked.

Jen rose majestically to her full height, and towered above her. “When I’m a schoolgirl, I shall wear a tunic all the time,” she announced. “You’ll be green with envy!”

“You won’t, then. Miss Macey won’t let you,” Rosamund warned her. “The Sixth aren’t allowed to, and you’re two feet taller than anybody in the Sixth.”

“Don’t you think it’s a topping plan, Mary-Dorothy?” Jen looked at Mary keenly.

“Splendid! You’ll enjoy it, I’m sure. Shall I take your cup away?” Mary spoke bravely.

Jen looked after her with troubled eyes, but made no comment.

“Time’s up!” Joy said briskly. “Now for country! We go to the downstairs gym. Sure you can find Room G, Rosamunda?”

“Right at the top! We’ll go on till we can’t go any higher, and then go round and round till we find it,” Rosamund said cheerfully. “Come on, Maidie!”

“Where on earth’s Room B?” Biddy demanded of Joy. “Our morris was away outside, round the corner, but Room B is somewhere in this huge place, isn’t it?”

“Yes—no! It’s across the yard. I’ll show you. We were there for morris. Fly, though! Or I’ll be late for my class,” and Joy ran off at full speed, all long flying legs, dodging through the crowd, with Mary and Biddy and Ruth plunging after her and trying vainly to keep her in sight.

“There!” Joy hurled herself downstairs and along passages and round corners, and at last pushed open a swing door. “Go straight on across the yard, that way, and you’ll find it on your left. Are you here for swords, too? Then you’ve a good chance of getting in to dinner early, if you can find your way. You’re quite close to the dining-room,” and she vanished.

“I shouldn’t have thought we were quite near anywhere!” Mary panted. “Shall we ever find any of them again?”

“We’ll wander round till we do. It is a weird place!” Biddy chuckled, and went in search of Room B.

It was a long narrow hall, with doors and windows all along one side. Ruth slipped into a chair near the piano, and watched with increasing interest, and with deepening respect for the brains that could remember all these different dances and movements.

The class was revising for the Elementary Certificate, so was supposed to know the dances. This was not always the case, however, and “Newcastle” and “Picking Up Sticks” had to be taught afresh, while “The Old Mole” and “Hey, Boys” came in for severe criticism. The teacher was small, and very neat in her blue tunic, with dark hair and rosy cheeks which soon grew redder still with the excitement of keeping the class up to the mark. Ruth watched her quick, bird-like movements with amused appreciation, but soon also formed a warm respect for her as a teacher, for she was very thorough and her knowledge of her work was absolute. Several of the students had continual questions to ask, about turns and hands and arms; no matter how suddenly they asked, or how abrupt the change from dance to dance, the answer came instantly, unhesitating, unerring; never once was there a moment’s pause or doubt, though Ruth began to suspect one or two girls of trying to puzzle her on purpose. She marked the register, looking carefully at each girl as her name was called; and knew most of them by the second day.

The sword class was revision also, and very thrilling to Ruth, who had never seen a sword dance. She watched the threeding of “Kirkby” with wondering eyes, and with increasing respect for the teacher, who kept watch over four sets of dancers at once, and hopped from one to another as smartly as a sparrow, with tireless energy.

But while Ruth watched her and the whole class, she never lost sight of Mary, and she knew that Mary had not forgotten the news Jen had brought. She had recovered from the blow; she was laughing and interested, and seemed to be enjoying herself as much as any one. She remembered the dances well, and was seldom at fault, but Ruth saw that she was not as good a dancer as most of the others; her movements were not as easy or graceful, though she was light enough on her feet; but she was, as she had said herself, stiff and sometimes awkward, trying to obey directions and to copy what she saw in others, without fully understanding how to do it.

While she was dancing, her whole mind was given to it, and she enjoyed herself fully and quite obviously loved every tune; she concentrated intently on the figure of the moment and had no time for wandering thoughts. But in the rest intervals there was a shadow on her face; she was no longer radiantly happy and excited, as Bidy still was; there was a cloud in the background, and it came down on her when she gave it the opportunity.

Ruth saw it, remembered her joyful face as she greeted Jen, her tone of admiring affection as she said, “How nice of you, Jenny-Wren!” and half understood. She did not understand yet why Mary’s feeling for these two, Joy and Jen, was so deep; but she saw that it was there, and that Mary was bruised and bewildered and all at sea at the prospect of having to live without Jen for some time.

When they had, by following others from the class, found the refreshment room, received their plates of hot meat and pudding from the kitchen, and secured seats at the end of one of the long tables, Mary was quiet still; but accounted for it, realising that the change from her morning mood demanded some explanation, by saying she was starving and tired out.

“I’m sure you must be! How you ever keep going I can’t imagine! I’d have been dead half-way through,” Ruth said warmly.

“Oh, you don’t die as long as the music goes on! But when it stops, that’s the time you feel limp. I never did so much before, of course. I wouldn’t miss it for the world; but it is a long

morning!”

“It’s a strenuous life, isn’t it? May we sit with you?” the Writing Person came up, carrying two plates of fruit and custard. “Did you ever hear such a row? I’d say it’s like the parrot-house at the Zoo, only that’s so obvious.”

“Do sit here!” Ruth said eagerly; anything to cheer Mary up!—and she had smiled at sight of a friend.

“It’s like the roar of a Tube train in a tunnel; or perhaps the noise of the sea in a cave,” Mary suggested. “Are you eating only pudding to-day?”

“Two lots?” Biddy laughed.

“My Margaret’s queuing up for the first course. I’ve been ordered to go and sit down,” and the Writer collapsed exhausted in a seat. “What a life! Why do we all do it? Aren’t we crazy? It’s nice to be waited on! I had my coffee brought to me, too. She said she’d go into the scum and fetch it out to me. I don’t believe she’s even tired.”

“I’m dead!” the tall girl said solemnly, and put down the meat plates tenderly. “What country are you doing?” to Biddy.

“Grade III.—‘Newcastle.’ I say! How funny! You’ve got a silver ring just like hers!” said Biddy, unabashed by Mary’s horrified frown.

The Writing Person and the schoolgirl looked at one another, meaning in their eyes. Then Margaret pulled up the sleeve of her blouse and showed a silver bracelet, carved in curious designs and letters. “We have bracelets, too, both just alike! Funny, isn’t it?”

“Oh! Is it because of your Camp Fire? Is it real? I’ve read her books”—Biddy dropped her voice politely. “But I didn’t know it was true. Is she really your Guardian? Do tell me about it! What is your Indian name? Do you have a gown?”

Ruth addressed the Writer, who was hungrily busy with her dinner. “I’ve read one of your books out in South Africa. It was lent to me by a girl on a farm only a few miles away from us.”

“Then you must live near Odzi? I’ve cousins there, and they like to have new books.”

“Yes, I know them. They’ll be thrilled to hear I’ve met you.”

“I’m owing them letters. I always am,” the Writer said sadly. “I’m afraid my letters to Odzi are few and far between.”

Mary caught Ruth’s eye and laughed guiltily. “I’m just as bad,” she said.

“I’ll fetch your coffee; shall I?” the schoolgirl was not too “dead” to be helpful.

“It’s *very* nice to have a waiting-maid!” her Guardian said pensively. “You’re making me very lazy!”

“You sit still!” Margaret’s tone was peremptory. “I’m going to be your page-boy for this week!”

She and Biddy were already good friends, and presently wandered off together to hunt for the cloakrooms, to do their hair and “make themselves respectable,” as the schoolgirl said.

A friend hailed the Writer. “I say! How’s the new book going?”

“I don’t know! They never tell *me*! But they seem to want another one, so it can’t have done too badly.”

Mary and Ruth followed the younger girls, to make room at the table for other hungry students, who kept crowding in to demand food.

“We’ll go and have a wash. Joy says there’s lovely hot water downstairs. And then we’ll find a corner and rest,” said Mary. “There’s nothing now for an hour and a half.”

“Good thing, too! How you can do any more I can’t think!”

“Oh, I want to go back and get ‘Newcastle’ right! I’m still hazy about those lines.”

“Why, you were right every time!”

“It must have been by accident, then. Or somebody must have put me in the right place. I don’t feel I understand it yet,” said Mary. “Now this is a real voyage of discovery! Where are those stairs? And which way do you turn at the bottom?”

“Mary, why do you care so much about Jen Robins going away?” Ruth asked insistently, as they revelled in the hot water and got rid of some of the dust.

Mary looked at her quickly. “Did you see? I’m sorry. I hope she didn’t. She’d think me such an awful idiot. I don’t quite know, Ruth. I’ll try to tell you to-night; not here! I want to think about it. We’ll miss her terribly, you know. We’ve been seeing her more than once a week, for over six months; always on her class nights, and often in between. She often comes in to see us for a few minutes. It will be queer not to have her running in, and not to have club nights to look forward to; and very horrid!”

“Yes, but that’s all the same for Bidy, and she isn’t as much cut up as you are!”

“No, there’s more behind. I’ll tell you as much as I can to-night, but not before Bidy. She doesn’t understand.”

And Ruth had to be content with that for the moment.

## CHAPTER VII

### GOING "SHENZI"

"The thing to do now," said Joy Shirley, meeting Mary and Ruth in the passage on their quest for a quiet resting-place, "is to go into Room A, bag a steamer-chair, and have a cig! I've just learned that from a set of Yorkshire girls at our table. 'I sa-ay! Coom oop into Room A-a-a, an' have a cig.!' " and she mimicked the broad accent. "Don't you love the north-country talk?" she asked of Ruth. "You hear it on every side here."

"Do you smoke?" Ruth asked curiously, as they dragged down steamer-chairs and lay luxuriously at full length, their feet on the wooden seats in front of them.

"I did once," Joy explained. "I've given it up. I've a little aunt down in the country, who's been more of a mother to me than anybody else. She didn't know I smoked, but one day she said to me and Joan, 'I hope I'll never hear of either of you girls taking to smoking! I wouldn't like to think of it at all.' I've never done it since that day. If she felt that way, it wasn't worth it. I didn't really care; I'd only begun because everybody else seemed to be doing it. I'd do more than that to please her."

"But if everybody kept off things when they were new, just to please old-fashioned people, we should never get anywhere!" Biddy argued. "Somebody must begin things sometime!"

Joy looked at her gravely. "Yes, that's all right. If it were a thing that mattered, that I felt ought to be done, I should go ahead. But a little thing like smoking isn't worth it. I suppose you smoke?" and she hailed the Writer and the schoolgirl. "Come and join our circle! We're waiting for the Pixie."

"I've never felt the slightest desire for it; and unless one is very keen, it must be a fearful waste of money," the Writer remarked.

"Why aren't you in our classes?" Joy demanded. "Where have you got to? You've been with Jen during term!"

"I'm doing Grade IV. Country, II. Morris."

"Help! Why on earth——? You've done all that years ago! What are you playing at?"

"We're learning 'Chelsea Reach' and 'Grimstock,' " the Writing Person said seriously.

"But why are you wasting time like that?"

"She's taking care of me," said the schoolgirl. "I don't know any of those advanced dances yet. She's going into classes with me. We're in one of the art rooms at the top," she said to Biddy. "There are plaster casts on the walls, and the room's so small that they're right under our eyes all the time. There's a hand; and a dead fish, that's been staring at me all day! I shall always see that hand when I hear 'Chelsea Reach'; and 'Grimstock' will always bring back the fish, I know!"

"We've got the most topping class!" Joy was saying, in answer to a question from Mary. "It isn't a class at all; it's a perpetual country-dance party! We haven't a teacher, but just a very jolly hostess. She goes round asking those who are left out of sets if they want to dance; she asks what we'd like to do next. To-day they wanted 'Mr. Beveridge,' after seeing it at the demonstration; so she asked how many knew it. We didn't; but most of them said they did. She looked surprised, but——"

"And doubtful!" added Jen, who had just come up and was standing beside Joy.



“Very doubtful! But she said, ‘We’ll see how it goes. We’ll see what the music suggests to you!’ and let them start without any instructions. There was a fearful muddle in about half a second, and her eyes got rounder and more full of horror——”

“And amusement,” Jen amended.

“Till at last she exploded, ‘Stop, stop! I don’t like the things the music suggests to you one bit! It doesn’t suggest much, does it? Suppose we take it slowly once!’ and then she taught it from the beginning. She’s quite a darling, and we’re going to have a tophole time!”

“An absolute dear!” Jen sat down and opened her leather case, and took out big bone needles and white wool and began to knit industriously.

“I’m happiest in swords this week,” said the Writer. “I’ve got the desire of my heart; *the* dance, and *the* teacher, and *the* accompanist, all at once. Did you ever hear of such gorgeous luck?”

“You know what you want, evidently,” Joy remarked. “Isn’t it rather dangerous to be so particular? How often in a century do you manage to get them all together?”

“Once in a lifetime. I don’t suppose it will ever happen again. We have had luck this time!”

“What’s the dance? And who’s the teacher? And—oh, the fiddle, I suppose! Lucky you!”

“*The* fiddle! Either of the rapper dances; I don’t mind which, but it must be rappers. As for teacher—need you ask?”

Joy laughed. “I’m just beginning rappers. I may get used to them some day. Jenny-Wren, your industry is appalling! Why can’t you do nothing, like the rest of us?”

Biddy had been watching Jen’s flying fingers with fascinated eyes. “I never saw you do any work before! It does look funny!”

“You little pig!” Jen said indignantly. “Haven’t I knitted jumpers by the dozen?”

“Is it for—what do you call her?—Janetta?” Mary asked.

“Janetta’s had hers,” the godmother said with dignity. “Her vests and jackets were waiting for her. She’s supplied for all emergencies! This isn’t for anybody—yet. It’s my cigarette,” she explained calmly.

“Your—how much?”

“My cigarette. My something to steady my nerves after the morning’s excitement. If I did nothing, I should keep running after people to talk to them. I need something to keep me still.”

“There’ll be more to show for it than there would be of a cigarette,” Ruth said laughing.

“I shall have to find a folk-dance baby to give it to, of course,” Jen added. “If I make a vest during the Vacation School, it will have to be for a little folk-dancer.”

“Where are you going to find it? Who is going to have a baby, just to oblige you?”

“I’ll find one somewhere,” Jen said cheerfully. “Don’t worry!—Here comes the Little One!”

“I’m so sorry! Some girls caught me and kept me talking. They were in my classes years ago; such dears! Now just half an hour!” and the Pixie dumped her case on the floor, took the chair Joy had kept for her, and put up her feet on another, in approved style. “Isn’t this *nice*! I’m going to darn my stockings; don’t you think it’s a good plan? But in half an hour I’ll have to run, and wash and dress myself, and be a little lady for the afternoon. I’ve got such a lovely class; Special Countries; just a nice little crowd. And in swords we’re doing the ‘Kirkby.’ It is nice to see you all together like this! And how are the babies?”—anxiously.

Joy gave the latest bulletins. “Jenny-Wren’s going down to see Janetta as soon as the School’s over. She hasn’t seen her goddaughter yet.”

"I only came back from Yorkshire yesterday," Jen urged.

"Are they nice babies? Has Joan's got hair like hers and yours?—oh, *good!* Is that knitting for her?" the Pixie had drawn a gray silk stocking over her hand and was darning with lightning speed and infinitesimal stitches. "*Look!*" she said proudly. "You can see what years I've had them by the darns. That's the way to make things last. Don't they all look lazy, Jenny-Wren? But they aren't godmothers, are they?"

"That isn't for Janetta," Joy remarked. "Jen's arranging for the Folk-Dance Society to have a special baby to wear that vest, because it's being made during the School week."

The Pixie chuckled. "I hope some one will rise to the occasion. And are you all living with Jen?"

"Help, no! I wouldn't have them!" Jen teased.

"We're all at King's," Joy said eagerly. "We're pretending we're women students at college! We thought we'd like to try the hostel life. So we've each got a little bedroom, all on one corridor, each with a gas fire and a gas ring and a shilling-in-the-slot meter; and last night \_\_\_\_\_"

"Shillings have quite a new meaning for me now!" Jen said solemnly. "My fire went out as I was changing for dinner last night, and I hadn't a shilling, and Joy hadn't, and Maidie hadn't, and Ros hid her purse and laughed at me. So we raided her room and found it, and confiscated all her shillings and put them into a common fund, which I'm taking care of; and we rescued my fire. At bedtime hers gave out, and she had to come and beg for one of her own shillings; she had to ask on her bended knees, and wait ten minutes, before she got it, too. I had my revenge!"

"What fun you must have!" Bidly said wistfully, then turned eagerly to Rosamund. "Couldn't I go home with you one day after classes, and see your cubies? Will you take me?"

"Rather! We'll ask you to dinner!" Rosamund said joyfully.

Maidlin leaned forward, her cheeks red with excitement, and whispered energetically.

Rosamund's eyes dilated. "Maidie, how gorgeous! Of course we will! I say, Biddums \_\_\_\_\_!"

"Will you have tea with me one day, Pixie?" Jen was asking. "Just with me? I want to talk."

"How exclusive!" Joy mocked. "And when don't you want to talk? Tell us that!"

"You may come," Jen conceded. "But not the children."

"Not fit for their ears, evidently! Wouldn't you think she was thirty-five? And she's going back to school next term!"

"It's to discuss a problem in psychology, Pixie," Jen said seriously, holding out the most tempting bait she knew.

"I'll come! I'll love it! To-morrow? After the lecture?" Then, with a lightning change of subject, because she had seen that Jen was in earnest and did not mean to say more in public, the Pixie turned to Mary, subconsciously aware that all was not well with her and that her silence had more than shyness lying behind it. "How are you getting on? I liked your article in last week's paper. I really did like it."

"Oh!" Mary coloured scarlet. "I never thought you'd see it."

"Jenny-Wren sent it to me, for a Christmas card. She knew I'd be interested."

"That was like Jen," Mary said in a low voice.

"You'll never advertise yourself, so I've got to do it for you, Mary-Dorothy," Jen retorted briskly. "When your book comes out, I shall give away dozens."

“May I come and sit beside you?” the Writing Person pleaded. “You’re a friend worth knowing!”

“What’s *your* new book going to be about?” the Pixie turned to her quickly.

“You,” the Writer retorted.

“The other day,” said the Pixie happily, not seeming at all upset by the prospect, “I said something at home, and the friend I live with said, ‘You ought to be in a book!’ So I said haughtily, ‘I *am* in a book!’ and stuck my nose in the air. She was very much impressed.”

“I don’t think I create things,” said the Writing Person. “I only combine them in new patterns; things I’ve seen and heard.”

“Combine me and Biddy in one body!” and the Pixie chuckled again. “I *say*! Wouldn’t we fight? I wonder who would win?”

“You would. Biddy would be crushed out. She wouldn’t have a chance of life.”

“We’re going up to the top to see Margaret’s hand and fish,” said Rosamund, and they went off together, followed by Biddy and Maidlin.

“I’d rather you than me!” Joy called after them. “Why can’t you kids rest when you have the chance?”

“You should knit,” said Jen, with placid superiority. “I should be like that if I hadn’t something to do.”

“We want to talk!” Rosamund retorted, over her shoulder. “Nobody else gets a chance while you lot are about!”

“There’s something up. I know Maidie’s danger-signals,” said Joy. “Did you see her red cheeks? They’ve a plan, and they want to discuss it without us.”

“And what do you think of us all? Are we a very funny crowd?” and the Pixie turned to Ruth, characteristically remembering the outsider and trying to draw her in. “You’re the cousin from Africa, aren’t you?”

“I think this is a real *shauri*,” Ruth said solemnly.

“What’s that? Is that African?”

“I’m sure it’s not African for a Vacation School,” said Joy.

“It’s what they say in East Africa for a great event. It’s not one of our words; the friends I came home with had been to Kenya, and Kitty always said things were *shauris*. This is a real big *shauri*! I like it. I’m coming every day. I’d like to join in the dancing; the easy kind! Some of it terrifies me. I’m going to make Mary take me to classes when they begin again. Then I’ll go home and introduce it into Rhodesia.”

“True for you!” said the Pixie delightedly. “Come to my classes! I’ll take care of you!—Now I really must go and change,” and she bundled her darning into her case again. “Or I shall be keeping my class waiting. See you to-morrow! I won’t forget about our tea!” to Jen, and she hurried away.

“This is not a place for private talks with Pixies!” said Joy again. “We’re lucky to get hold of her at all.—Oh, help! I’m stiff already!” as she rose carefully from the depths of her chair. “Can you find Room B, Mary-Dorothy?”

“Why do they call you that?” Ruth asked, as she and Mary crossed the yard.

“It’s a dance—‘The Mary and Dorothy.’ They insist I was called after it. It is my name, of course; but I only heard of the dance last spring.”

When the afternoon class was over, and the Director’s lecture had held Mary and Biddy and Ruth fascinated for half an hour, it was time, as Biddy said, “to roll into a bus and go home.”

“Why do we live so high up?” she groaned, as they toiled up the flights of stairs.

But when tea was over she had revived. “Would you mind if I went out, Mary? I want to tell Vivien all about it. She’s coming with me one day to see the School. Ruth will keep you company.”

“Out!” said Mary. “I don’t mind, if it’s only to see Vivien. But I don’t know how you can! I feel more like bed. Remember to-morrow morning!” and she lay in the big chair, while Ruth cleared the table.

“Oh, this is a real big *shauri*! What does it matter being a little tired? I promised Viv I’d come.”

“Go along, then! But don’t faint half-way up the stairs!”

“I never thought she’d want to go out again to-night,” Mary said, as Bidley clattered down the staircase. “Vivien is her chum, so far as she has one in town; but she’s a very poor second to Rosamund and Maidlin. They’ve cut out everybody else in Bidley’s affections. She says she’s going to be Maidie’s private secretary some day; Maidie is an heiress and will be very well off.”

“And Bidley’s bagged the job of looking after her business for her? Is Maidie agreeable?”

“Delighted. It’s looked on as settled.”

“You were going to tell me things,” Ruth suggested, sitting on the big “humpy” before the fire and clasping her knees with her hands.

“Yes. I thought we’d have to wait till Bidley was in bed. I’d rather she didn’t understand. About Jen, and why I felt so breathless and knocked flat to hear she was going away. It’s not merely the pleasure of seeing her all the time,” Mary said slowly. “That’s the kind of thing one has to learn to do without at times. You can’t always have your friends. It’s only that with Bidley. She’s sorry, too, but she’ll get over it. But I’ve a queer feeling that I depend on Jen; that I must see her regularly, or I shall go all wrong. She gives me something; unconsciously, of course. If I don’t see her now and then, to get—to get recharged, like an electric battery!—I’m afraid I shall run down and go all to pieces.”

“How do you mean? And how could you ‘go all wrong’? In what way?” Ruth asked, looking both puzzled and worried.

“Drift back into something she saved me from; something unhealthy. As long as I’m going to see her in a few days, I shan’t go back to it. I couldn’t face her if I did; I’d be ashamed. But if I’ve got to go three months without seeing her, I don’t know how I’ll stand it.”

Ruth turned and gazed at her. Then she said swiftly, “Tell me what you mean, Mary! I knew there was something. You’ve been two people; one who used to write to us, and seemed dull and uninteresting; and the other who wrote that thrilling letter that made me so curious about you—the person you are now, who’s wide awake and does things, and writes, and teaches; who’s alive!”

“Yes,” Mary assented. “And it was Jen Robins and Joy Shirley who brought me to life again. That’s why I care so much about them both.”

“I saw how you cared. It was in your face whenever you spoke to them. But what was the matter with you before, Mary? You can tell me, can’t you? You’ve said so much that I’d like to know,” Ruth pleaded.

“I must tell you, or you’ll think I’d taken to drink or drugs!” Mary said grimly. “It wasn’t anything like that. But I used to dream, and make up stories for myself, and live in them. There was nothing bad in them; they were only romantic and silly and waste of time. I ought to have been writing, but I didn’t know how to start; and I was lazy; and so I kept the stories

for myself, and never troubled to make them sensible, so that they could be written down. It may not sound very bad; but it had gone on for years, and I couldn't stop it. And the result was what you felt in my letters, when I did force myself to write; it wasn't often, I'm afraid! I was dull and lifeless, wrapped up in myself and living in an unreal world; no good as a companion to Biddy; no good to anybody."

"Going *shenzi*," said Ruth, in a low voice "*Shenzi*? Oh, it's another of Kitty Gordon's East African words. Everything was either *shauri* or *shenzi* with her. It means running to seed, going to the bad, going down."

"Going to seed doesn't express what I was doing," Mary said sombrely. "For that holds the possibility of producing something new. The trouble was that I wasn't doing anything; I was just existing. I was content to sit here night after night, living in a world no one else dreamed of, while Biddy found home dull and stodgy and went out to the pictures. I never went anywhere. I was getting old very quickly. That was what I meant by too much concentration! But it wasn't on my work. I used to excite myself with romantic dreams, and get all stirred up inside, and never do anything to work it off. I see now how unhealthy and unnatural it was. It stopped me from attempting real work of any kind. Then one day Jen floated into our office, carrying violets; I'm not being poetical; you've seen how beautifully she moves and carries herself! She came here to see me about some typing, and brought me daffodils and bluebells from Yorkshire; and from the first I felt how healthy and happy and jolly she was. She came again, and brought Joy; and they took me to watch folk-dancing. Then they took us to the Pixie's party, and Jen hauled me in and made me dance; I was scared stiff that I'd make a fool of myself! I began going to her classes; then Joy asked us to the Hall, and we had three weeks in the country with them. By the end of that time, all the unhealthy secret stuff was dropping away from me; I never tried to give it up, as I had done before at times; I simply lost all desire for it. It couldn't live while I was near them; it was so utterly opposed to their happy normal outlook on life. And it has never troubled me again. But then I've been seeing Jen every week. And I suppose I've been depending on the sight of her to buck me up and keep me straight. She's been like a—a kind of mental tonic! I've had her at least once a week. I don't know what will happen if I lose her for three months. That's why I was so much upset. I don't mean that I thought at once how bad it would be for me; that sounds horribly self-centred! I've only thought that all out during the afternoon. But I felt as if I were drowning; as if I had lost the thing that made life worth while. That's what you saw and wondered at. I asked myself why I felt so lost, and thought it out. I'd never realised till to-day how much I depended on her."

"But you'll never go *shenzi* again, now that you understand, Mary. You couldn't!" Ruth remonstrated.

"I don't know. I'm not strong-minded. I feel as if she and Joy had been holding me up."

"But you knew you couldn't have them always! And"—with unconscious wisdom—"they'd know if you went *shenzi* again, even if they are in the country! They'd be upset. You wouldn't like that. I suppose they *do* know about it? You told them, didn't you?"

"Yes, I felt I had to. I was so grateful. They asked me to promise I'd never slide back, but I wouldn't. I couldn't promise. But I promised to try."

"They're expecting you to keep straight now. You couldn't let them down!" Ruth urged.

"That's all very well," Mary said restlessly. "But a thing like that, for years and years, leaves results. I'm not strong-minded. They've been helping me; I don't know if I'm strong enough to stand alone."

"I think you are! You're well again. You don't live on tonics when you're better, Mary!"

Mary leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, and stared into the fire. For a long time, as it seemed, there was silence. Ruth was waiting hopefully.

“No!” Mary said at last. “Jen and Joy have given me a big thing, and now I’ve got to fight to keep it. They’ll feel I’ve failed them if I go under again. I can’t disappoint them. I will fight, Ruth. I won’t go *shenzi* again without a struggle. I don’t know that I’ll win, but I will have a try for it.”

“I knew you would! And you will win!” Ruth said warmly.

“But I do feel as if I’d lost something from the centre of life. Something that everything depended on,” Mary said wistfully. “Here comes Bidy! Don’t give me away to her, Ruth. She wouldn’t understand.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### MISCHIEF AFOOT

“It will have to be to-night,” Rosamund said excitedly, as the four younger girls found themselves in no fear of being overheard, standing under Margaret’s “dead fish,” a plaster cast on the wall of the art room. “Couldn’t you come too?” eagerly, to the new friend. “Maidie could have Biddy, and you could come with me.”

“I’ve got to hurry home after the lecture. Sorry! I’d love to come. But Mother’s in Scotland, and I’m doing the housekeeping.”

“You’re working hard at it, aren’t you?” Rosamund and Biddy asked together, jeeringly. It had not taken many minutes to make them all good friends.

“I do things in the evenings,” Margaret said placidly. “Our little girl’s very good; she’s awfully clever! And Daddy puts up with things beautifully, and Kid’s gone to Scotland with Mother. But I must be in sometimes, so I’d better go home.”

“Then you must slip away to-night,” Rosamund turned to Biddy. “Leave a note on your pin-cushion; that kind of thing! Mary-Dorothy’s got your cousin; she’ll be all right. You see, Joy and Jen are going to the theatre to-night, with some girls from our table. They’ll think it’s so nice for us to have your company!”

“They didn’t want to go, because of leaving us; and they wouldn’t let us go too,” Maidlin added.

“They weren’t keen at all. But these girls asked them to join a party, and they didn’t want to seem piggish, so they said they’d go. They say we’re to go to bed very early, because we’re so tired,” Rosamund scoffed, and demonstrated her tiredness by playing leapfrog over Maidlin, who bent her back till her thick black plait swept the floor.

“You’d better dust that tail of yours,” Biddy suggested, and proceeded to do it for her. “The floor’s sure to be filthy. Right-o, Ros! I won’t ask Mary till afterwards. I’d never dream of being such a rotter if she hadn’t Ruth, but as Ruth’s there it’s all right. I don’t see why she should mind.”

“Not if you don’t!” Margaret laughed.

“Oh, I’m keen! I’ll love it. I say, Maidie, we’ll talk all night!” And with that cryptic promise Biddy fled to find Room B and Mary, and the smart little teacher with the rosy cheeks; and was very innocent, if rather excited, all the way home and all through tea, excitement which passed unnoticed by Mary in her own weariness, however, and by Ruth in her preoccupation with Mary’s trouble.

“We’ve asked Biddy to dinner to-night, Joy,” Rosamund said airily, as she and Maidlin climbed into Joy’s waiting car beside Jen. “We thought it would be a good time, when you and Jen were going out.”

“Oh!” Joy knit her brows, not sure if it were such a good plan; she knew her adopted daughters. “You might have consulted us, Rosamunda!”

“We only arranged it just before this last class, up in the room with the dead hand and fish. Margaret took us to see them.”

Joy turned and spoke sharply over her shoulder. “You went up on purpose to arrange it. Be straightforward, please, Rosamund, or I’ll have no use for you. I saw your faces as you went.”

Rosamund looked at Maidlin, raising her eyebrows. Joy's outbursts of temper did not come often, but she spoke sharply now and then, and at such times she had to be treated with respect. In the present instance she had some right on her side, and Rosamund knew it.

"I'm sorry, Joy. We didn't mean any harm."

"We didn't think you'd mind, Joy. You don't mind us having a bit of a joke now and then, do you?" Maidlin asked anxiously.

Joy's face softened. "Of course not, Madalena. But I don't like to feel you're cheating me. Now don't chatter! King's Road, Chelsea, by night, with you three in the car, demands as much concentration as 'Mr. Beveridge's Maggot.' Need I say more?"

Maidlin subsided, but telegraphed a look to Rosamund. "We'll have to tell her all about it, Ros," she whispered.

"Help, no! Not yet, Maidie!"

"Yes, I shall. She wouldn't like it."

"Don't be an idiot! She won't mind!"

"I'm not, and she might. I'm not going to risk it."

"You'd better not risk it!" They had forgotten Jen, who spoke severely. "I don't know what it is, but we're quite aware you're up to something."

"It's only a joke with Biddey," Rosamund said hurriedly, and eyed Maidlin anxiously.

"Is Biddey going home first, then? Why didn't you bring her home with you now?" Joy demanded, as she put them down at the big doors of the college hostel, where over a hundred students, all folk-dancers, were spending the week.

"Because we hadn't asked you, and she hadn't asked Mary-Dorothy, Joy," Rosamund said meekly.

"Both of which could have been remedied, and should have been," Joy said shortly.

Rosamund raised her eyebrows again. "She wanted to put on a frock. She didn't think a tunic would do for dinner. We told her people changed at night."

"Oh, I see! There's something in that. When is she coming, then? She'll have to fly round."

"It isn't far from their flat. She's to get here just before seven."

"Don't let her stay too late. I'd rather she had come another night, when we were in. She'll keep you two talking, and you won't get to bed, and she'll have to go home alone late. Perhaps Mary won't let her come."

Rosamund, knowing Biddey's intentions, did not think Mary would hinder her.

Maidlin, looking grave, climbed the wide staircase slowly, while Jen and Rosamund looked for letters in their pigeon-holes. Letters for Maidlin were so rare that she did not expect them. She stood at the door of her bedroom, her face troubled and irresolute; then switched on the light, threw her bag of shoes and handkerchiefs on the table, and knelt to light the gas fire. It popped and went out, and she sat wearily on her heels and gazed at it sadly.

"You bother! What a shabby trick!—Jen! I want a shilling, please!" she raised her voice plaintively.

Jen, in the corridor, laughed and came to the rescue. "I should have thought you'd both have come home well supplied with shillings, after last night!"

"We did. We went to the nice lady in the tea-room and got change; but mine's in my bag over there. It's easier to ask you. And I don't know how to work the thing."

"Oh, I do!" Rosamund called from the doorway. "I had a lesson last night.—There!" as the fire cheered up and came to itself with a rush. "Now you'll be warm and happy for hours,



Maidie!” There was meaning in her tone.

Jen went off to read her letters, and Maidlin drew her curtains and sat down in the big chair and stared into the fire, still in her big coat and blue tunic and scarlet beret. In the next room Rosamund was whistling “Chelsea Reach,” as she changed her shoes and spread her frock on the bed in readiness.

The students’ rooms were convenient little places, with light-coloured walls and dark green woodwork; mantelpiece, window-frames, and the panelled doors of the big cupboards, one all shelves which drew out like trays, the other fitted with hooks as a wardrobe and holding the precious gas meter. The room held great possibilities of comfort, for any one to whom it was to be a home for a whole term; Jen longed to own one and make it cosy, as she was sure its rightful owner did; but for a week it was not worth while doing much. “Especially as we’re out *all* the time!” Jen had decided. “But it could be made jolly and homelike. I’d like to play house in mine!”

Each room had its low, and very narrow, couch-bed; its desk, with pigeon-holes and drawer, and cupboard beneath; its big lounge chair with cushions; its writing chair, and folding table which could be opened out and drawn up to the fire, for work or tea parties. Below each gas fire was a tiny gas ring, pushed out of sight; and the temptation to make tea or coffee or cocoa at all hours must be irresistible, the girls felt sure, to any one supplied with kettle and cups and saucers, as of course any student would be. The friends from the Abbey had not been prepared for this possibility, however, and were not supplied with kitchen utensils; and had no need of them, as they were indeed out all the time, as Jen had said.

Maidlin sat staring into the red glow of her fire. She tossed her beret on to the bed, but kept on her coat, with its big fur collar, for the great building always seemed cold. She had learned to like open windows during her year at the Hall with Joy; but she came nearer to shutting hers in this hostel than she had been for months. She was wont to say afterwards that she only knew one colder place, and that was the Polytechnic itself.

At last she sprang up and went along the corridor to Joy’s door. As she passed Rosamund’s room the door opened, and Rosamund, who had been listening nervously, looked out. “Maidie! You’re never going to tell Joy? You’ll ruin everything! It’s only a joke, Maidie!”

“Then it doesn’t matter telling her,” Maidlin retorted. “She said, ‘Be straightforward!’ That’s what’s worrying me. I’m afraid she’ll think we’re not.” She ran past Rosamund and into Joy’s room, and Rosamund gazed after her in dismay. She had always considered herself the leader, but she had realised once or twice that Maidie would not always be led.

Joy, still in her tunic, was sitting on the edge of her bed reading a letter from Joan. She looked up. “Hello, Madalena! What’s the row?”

“Joy, Bidy’s going to stay all night!” it came out with a rush.

“*What?*” Joy dropped the letter and stared at her.

“Just for a joke. You don’t mind, do you? She’s wild to see our little rooms, and know what it feels like to be a student at college. We were going to tell you in the morning, of course; but when you said that about being straightforward, I thought you’d better know.”

“But where is she going to sleep?” Joy gasped. “What does Mary say? What’s the point of it?”

“Mary’s got her cousin, so she’s all right. We just thought it would be fun. I thought of it, when Bidy said she’d like to see our rooms. Ros asked her to dinner; and I said, ‘Wouldn’t it be fun if she could stay all night?’ And after that you couldn’t stop Bidy.”

“No, I suppose not,” Joy said grimly. “And you meant us to go off to the theatre knowing nothing about it? I’m glad you thought better of it. I like a joke as well as anybody; but I don’t want to think you’re hiding things from me, Maidie.”

“I never will! Joy, I never did!” Maidlin’s inborn shyness held her back, while her passionate southern nature drove her forward to throw herself into Joy’s arms.

Joy knew she needed encouragement. She held out her hand, and Maidlin ran to her and dropped on the ground at her side.

Joy’s arm tightened round her. “Baby, I’m glad you came to tell me. It isn’t quite the same for Ros, is it? You and I don’t have secrets. She’s very fond of me, but I am a grown-up person and therefore can’t always be trusted to understand. That’s how Ros feels. It’s different for you and me. You know I’ll understand. Isn’t that it?”

“Yes, oh, yes! Joy, it is different! I do belong to you! Ros has got her own mother and father. I haven’t anybody. But you’re everybody, Joy. And you do understand!”

“Of course I do. Now tell me all about Biddy. I won’t forbid it, even if I think it’s silly, unless there’s a good reason.”

“It won’t do anybody any harm,” Maidlin whispered, pleading vehemently. “Other people needn’t even know she’s here. We’re all strange yet; they can’t know us all. We’ll say she’s come to dinner; and then she’ll come up to our rooms to talk; and it won’t hurt anybody if she just stays on, will it, Joy? And it will be such fun!”

Joy’s lips twitched. “I don’t really see that it will hurt anybody, except perhaps you and Ros. You ought to go to bed early and have a long night’s rest; and you won’t get it if Biddy’s here. But I want to know where she’s going to sleep? Don’t say you’re going to try to put two in one of these teeny wee beds, for it can’t be done! It’s all I can do to turn round in mine. Biddy’s fairly hefty; and so is Ros. They can share a bed, if they like; but you aren’t going to do it. I shall put my foot down heavily there. If Biddy comes, she doesn’t sleep in your bed!”

“We thought perhaps we could share. We said we’d make a bed on the floor, in front of the fire, in one of the rooms, with the cushions from our chairs and our big coats; and we could sleep there and in the beds in turn.”

“Quite so!” Joy said grimly. “Now you can tell Rosamunda this. These are my terms! You can make up a bed for Biddy; I’ll lend you the rugs from the car, and if you let down the back of your chair, it will make a better bed than the floor. I don’t see that it will hurt anybody for Biddy to spend one night with you. But I will not have either you or Ros jumping in and out of bed at all hours of the night, on to that cold wooden floor, in this draughty place. Remember I’m responsible for you both; Rosamund’s been trusted to me by her people; and you belong to me, and you were ill in the summer. Unless you both promise to go to bed as usual and stay there, I shall take Biddy right home, and give up the theatre. Now will you promise?”

“Yes, oh, yes! You are a dear, Joy!” Maidlin said fervently.

“Right-o! Now go and tell Ros. What are you going to do with Biddy in the morning, by the way? You can’t produce her at breakfast? Are you going to smuggle her porridge up to her?” Joy asked sarcastically.

“She says she’ll go out and get it at a shop. She knows she mustn’t be seen at breakfast. People might ask questions.”

“They might! But there’s a tea-shop by the High Street station. Right-o! You seem to have planned it very thoroughly. If Biddy thinks the ‘fun’ is worth an uncomfortable night, I won’t interfere. I can’t see it myself.”

“We asked Margaret to come too, but she had to go home to see about to-morrow’s dinner,” Maidlin ventured.

“Margaret? Oh, is that the long schoolgirl? Showed her good sense,” Joy commented.

“She said she’d love to come!”

Joy laughed. “You must give me one other promise, Madalena. I know you want to sit up and talk to Bidy. You’ll be in bed by nine; dinner’s over at seven-thirty, so it gives you plenty of time. You may talk till ten, and Ros may come into your room, if Bidy sleeps there. You are *not* to go skipping about the corridor in your nightie, so the talking had better be in your room. But at ten you’ll all go to your own beds and stop talking. Ten’s the limit. Now fetch Rosamunda to hear my conditions. I’ll have her promise for herself!”

“Ros! Ros! Come and promise all Joy wants!” Maidlin cried joyfully, at Joy’s door; Rosamund was waiting anxiously at hers to hear the result of the conclave. “Ros, it’s all right! Joy’s a perfect dear, as usual!”

“As usual!” Joy laughed. “Help, Madalena! Do you really mean it?”

“Of course I do!” Maidlin said fervently. “You always are!”

## CHAPTER IX

### BIDDY'S NIGHT OUT

At the sound of steps on the stairs outside, Mary went towards the kitchen, to put on the kettles for cocoa and hot water bottles. But a ring at the bell warned her that the newcomer was not Bidly. She went to the door, and found a note in the letterbox.

"It's—goodness gracious! It's from Bidly!" she cried, sudden sharp anxiety in her voice. "Can anything have happened?"

"I shouldn't think so," Ruth said hastily, as Mary tore open the note. "Perhaps the friend has asked her to supper, and they sent word round for fear you'd worry. Bidly can look after herself."

"No—yes—she's all right," Mary had recovered from the moment's fright, and was reading the note hastily. "Oh, the silly children! Bidly might have told us. Just fancy having the energy to do all that after such a day! She'll be all right, of course; but I don't know how Joy and Jen will like it," and she handed the note to Ruth.

"DEAR OLD THING,—Don't be scared! I'm all right. And don't be wild. There's no harm in it, but it's a little unusual, so I'm doing it first and telling you afterwards. Viv will take this round for me. I'm going to spend the night with Ros and Maidie. I'm dying to see their little rooms, so they've asked me to dinner, and we're going to take turns in the beds, and the odd man will sleep on the floor. I've got my gymmy and shoes. I'll meet you in the Scouts' Hall at 9.30 to-morrow morning. You don't mind, do you? You and Ruth can have a good old pow-wow without me. Of course, I wouldn't have dreamed of going if she hadn't been here. I wouldn't have left you all on your own. But you've got her for company, so where's the harm?"

"See you both to-morrow! Yours,

"BRIDGET."

"I'm glad I'm being of some use in the world!" Ruth laughed. "And I think we've had the pow-wow already!"

"I wondered she took the trouble to put on a frock just to go to Vivien's." Mary looked worried. "I wish she had consulted me!"

"Would you have let her go?"

"Not unless Joy and Jen had given permission. I don't feel at all sure that they've been consulted. If not, they may not like it."

"I'm sure they haven't. They were going to the theatre, weren't they? It's to be a secret; that's where half the fun comes in," Ruth said promptly. "Don't worry, Mary-Dorothy! They're good sorts; they'll take it as a joke. And anyway, it's their own two who'll get the blame; they obviously invited Bidly. I think Rosamund can stand it!"

"I don't like to annoy them, all the same. I'm not worrying about Bidly; she'll be all right. She's used to going about by herself. But if Joy and Jen don't know, I'm afraid there'll be trouble when they find her there. For they're sure to find out."

"You know, Mary-Dorothy—I like the name!—you think too much of those two," Ruth said decidedly, as they stood by the fire before going to bed.

“I never could. I’ve told you what they’ve done for me.”

“I don’t mean that. I’m thinking of your tone as you speak of them, and your face as you look at them. You think they’re both perfect; you think nothing’s good enough for them. You’ve put them up on pedestals, as if they were too good for this world, and you gaze up at them worshipfully from an immense distance.”

“Ruth, don’t be absurd!” Mary began to laugh. “How silly you are! I don’t. I’m very fond of them, and very grateful to them; that’s all.”

“You may not have thought about it. It may be unconscious; but it’s there. You look up to them both yearningly; you like to be where you can gaze at them and hear them speak. Everything they say is right. It may sound absurd, but——”

“It does. And you’re an idiot!”

“Very likely. So are you,” Ruth retorted cheerfully. “I just want to warn you. They’re jolly nice girls, and kind and friendly, and all that; but they aren’t the sort of goddesses you think them. Sooner or later you’ll find out they’re only human and no better than other people, and then you’ll get a shock. They’ll disappoint you somehow, and the images you’ve stuck up on pedestals will come down with a crash, and you’ll be fearfully upset. It’s not safe to think anybody’s as good as you think those two are. You don’t believe they’ve got any faults. Everybody has. You’ll find them out some day, and it will hurt you. I want you to be prepared for it, that’s all.”

“I’ll risk it,” said Mary, after a pause. “I don’t believe either of them will ever hurt me. I know they aren’t perfect, but they’re always kind. I’d rather keep my own thoughts of them, and risk being disillusioned some day, than have doubts of them.—You may be right. It’s a way I have; I’ve realised it now and then. I don’t always see things and people as they are, but as I want to see them. But I’m very happy with my thoughts of them, so where’s the harm? I’d rather think them better than they are than worse!”

“You’ve a fearfully strong imagination, old thing!” Ruth said gently. “And you aren’t a bit practical. It’s jolly useful if you’re going to write books; but in ordinary life it may be a bit dangerous. You like a person or a place or a thing, and at once your imagination gets busy and weaves a kind of romance all round the object of your affections; and you see it, or her, or them, through a kind of glamour, which makes you very happy but quite unable to judge of realities! It really isn’t fair to people. You turn some one into an ideal, and love and worship her, when she’s quite an ordinary sort of person; then you expect her to live up to your picture of her. Sooner or later you’ll find she doesn’t, and then your ideal will vanish, and you’ll be left shivering in a broken world.”

Mary gave a little laugh. “Ruth, I think you’d better write the next article! A lot of that’s true, though I’d never thought of it before. I do idealise things; I don’t see them clearly. It’s certainly true about places. I think of the Abbey and the Hall, down in the country, as happy dream-places that don’t really exist, with sunshine and flowers and birds and friends.”

“And no mud, I suppose? Or spiders? Or damp mists from the woods? Or smoky chimneys?”

“Oh, I forget all those! I love the places so much that I could never look at them coldly and critically as a stranger might.”

“And you’re the same with people. It’s very nice of you, and for you; but I don’t want you to break your heart some day, when your ideals vanish like soap-bubbles.”

“Joy and Jen will never break my heart!” Mary said stoutly. “I feel quite sure of them. And if I will have an imagination, I suppose I’ve got to pay for it. It’s very useful! Now what about

supper and bed, since we haven't got to wait for Biddy? I wonder how late those silly children will sit talking?"

Biddy was uncomfortably conscious all through dinner of the amusement in Joy's eyes as she looked at her. "Does Joy know?" she whispered to Rosamund at last. "I thought it was to be a secret!"

"Maidie went and gave the show away. It's all right; Joy says you may stop. I'll tell you all about it later. We had to promise some things, to please her," Rosamund murmured in reply.

Biddy's 'bus had been held up, and she had arrived five minutes late, to find Rosamund and Maidie waiting for her in the vestibule very impatiently. They refused to take her upstairs, so she had to leave her hat and coat and little case in the hall.

"Everybody's gone in. Jen's keeping a place for you beside us. Do be quick, Biddy! Keep on your knitted coat; the dining-room was cold last night; and it looks topping over that green frock!"

"I don't know how I'm going to get the frock home to-morrow! It won't go in my case," Biddy said breathlessly, and followed them into the big refectory, where the hundred or so students were seated at long tables. It was something of an ordeal even to Biddy, and she slipped into her seat beside Rosamund feeling subdued and glad to escape further notice—only to find Joy's eyes on her from across the table, with that mocking twinkle which made her sure she was being laughed at.

"I hope you'll have a very pleasant evening!" Joy said politely, as she rose with the rest of the theatre-goers. "Maidie, I'm trusting you. Remember your promise!"

"Go to bed early, like good children!" Jen flung back at them over her shoulder.

"Hope you have a good time! Don't be too late home, or you'll be locked out!" Rosamund called after them. "And you'll all be late for breakfast. Maidie and I won't wait for you!"

"Maidie, why did you tell them?" Biddy burst out, as soon as the doors had swung shut behind the elder girls.

"I can't cheat Joy. I never have, and I never will. But she doesn't mind, Biddy."

"She thinks we're idiots, though," Biddy grumbled. "I hate to be looked at as if I were a silly kid! What did you have to promise?"

"We'll tell you upstairs. Finished? Then come and see everything!"

"What a huge place!" Biddy said appreciatively, as they went up the first flight of stairs.

"That's the common room," Rosamund announced, as proudly as if she had built it herself, and pointed down a long corridor to where the glow of a big coal fire showed through glass doors.

"Let's see!" and Biddy set off to explore. "Oh, what a jolly room! *What* chairs! Can anybody sit in here?" and she sank into a big lounge chair. "I'm going out of sight! We ought to stay and keep that gorgeous fire company for a while. It mustn't be wasted! I adore coal fires!"

There were lounge chairs and big couches, each looking more comfortable than the last; rugs on the polished wood floor; books in the cases against the wall, a piano in an alcove. With the blazing fire, it was a very tempting resting-place, and Biddy tried all the chairs in turn, and then lay and rolled luxuriously on the sofa. But other girls arrived and sat down with books and writing-pads; and with a meaning glance at one another, the three first-comers slipped away and left them in peace, to seek more excitements upstairs.

"I want to dance down these long corridors!" Biddy laughed exultantly. "Or have races! What a huge place! Don't you get lost?"

“We did last night. We lost Jen, and had to send out search-parties; and she was in the wrong corridor, hunting for us all the time.”

Biddy giggled. “I shouldn’t have thought it would be easy to overlook Jen! There’s plenty of her! What’s in here? Bathrooms?”

“Washing cubies. Each bedroom has its own cubicle; we told you about them. Here’s mine!” and Rosamund switched on a light and showed a little corridor, all white, with three white doors on each side.

She opened one, and Biddy remonstrated. “Oh, but it says ‘Miss Jones’! You’ve gone to the wrong door, Ros! I hope Miss Jones isn’t inside!”

“I’m Miss Jones, or she’s me. I mean, I’m in her room. She’s the student who lives here in term,” Rosamund explained. “Isn’t it all neat? See the dinky little shelves, and rods, and hooks! Everything you could possibly want! And boiling water at half-past seven in the morning!”

“Glory! Who gets up early? It’s awfully cute! And is it just for you?”

“All for me. Maidie’s cuby’s next door. Now come and see our rooms!”

“That’s your bed,” Maidlin introduced Biddy to a pile of rugs and coats heaped in her big chair. “We had to promise faithfully we wouldn’t change in the middle of the night; Joy wouldn’t hear of it. But she said you’d be quite comfy.”

“Said you’d be as comfy as you deserved, anyway,” Rosamund amended. “We may talk till ten, but then we’ve got to switch off. That’s hours and hours yet!”

Biddy, enraptured, poked into every corner of the room and then examined Rosamund’s as thoroughly. “Now let’s sit round the fire and talk!” she said gleefully, when she had peeped into Joy’s and Jen’s rooms also. “I brought some things, so that we could stodge. Where’s my case?”

The refreshment-room at the Chelsea Polytechnic had proved a boon, in view of an entertainment of this kind. Chocolates, fruit, cakes, fancy biscuits, and shortbread were all on sale; and each of the girls had laid in a stock and brought the plunder home in her shoe-bag. Biddy had brought shelled nuts and almonds as well, and a tin of *café au lait* from a shop round the corner.

“I made the man open it for me. I had to carry it rather carefully, of course! There’s sugar; and a spoon. You said you could borrow a pan.”

“Yes, from the little pantry in the side corridor. We bagged a kettle there last night, and water for our bottles,” and Rosamund ran off to find a pan.

“We’ll put it back for other people later. Everybody’s out at theatres,” she said, and drew out Maidlin’s gas ring and put on the pan to boil.

Biddy had brought an aluminium cup. The coffee was mixed in this, and they all drank in turns, while more water boiled for the next instalment. And though all three had seemed to enjoy their dinner downstairs, the fact made no appreciable difference to the disappearance of the feast. Maidlin arranged the biscuits and cakes, sweets and nuts, on sheets of notepaper on the broad flat fender, and bade the visitor help herself. Rosamund spread rugs from Joy’s car on the floor, and told her to make herself at home. Biddy proceeded to do both with much enjoyment, and, by way of contributing her share, described the Christmas festivities at the flat, and told the stories, in great detail, of the Christmas play, and the film she had seen the night before. She told much of Ruth also; her gifts, her story; and the other two listened enthralled.

“It’s as much like a book as Maidie is!” Rosamund proclaimed.

Maidlin gave a little shriek of horror. "It's nine o'clock, and we haven't made Bidy's bed yet! And we promised to go to bed at nine!"

Rosamund sprang up to help. "Fly round, then! You put on water for the bottles and clear up this mess. We'll make the bed. Then we'll all undress, and I'll come and sit on your bed till it strikes ten, and we'll put the light out and talk in the dark. Joy knew we'd want to talk in bed, so she arranged it for us beautifully. She's rather a sport, for she didn't really approve."

"No, she thought we were silly," Maidlin said plaintively. "But she fetched the rugs for us."

"Jolly decent of her, in the circs.," said Bidy, and helped to arrange her makeshift bed. "This is going to be awfully comfy!"

For over half an hour they sat on the beds and chatted, Rosamund rolling out at intervals to fill bottles and convey them to beds. "I'll do Joy's and Jen's, too, though they don't deserve it, gadding about like this! If they aren't hot enough for them, they can heat them up again. Switch on for a sec., or there'll be a ghastly mess on the floor, Biddums!"

"It's never quite dark here, then," Bidy remarked, as the light in the room was switched off again, and the glow from the corridor shone in through the glass panels at the top of the door.

"That light goes out at eleven," Rosamund explained, "and then it's worse, for people begin running about with nightlights and torches, and the light flashes in your eyes and you think the place is on fire. They aren't nearly all in bed; they aren't even in the building, if they've been to the theatre."

"Joy may tell us to go to sleep at ten," said Maidlin, "but she knows quite well it isn't possible. It wasn't last night, anyway. The row the theatre people made would have wakened anybody."

"Help! Did they go to the theatre the first night?" cried Bidy. "But they'd only just arrived!"

"That lot at our table are from Yorkshire, and they'd been travelling all day, from Leeds and 'Hooddersfield,' as they call it," said Rosamund, "but they went to a play at night; and to-night they've gone to another."

"I call that overdoing it," Bidy said virtuously. "And did they go to classes this morning?"

"Oh, rather!"

"But they aren't very keen. They don't care much about it," said Maidlin. "I heard them talking. They don't like their classes, or their room, or their teacher. They've come to take the exam."

"Hope they'll fail!" Bidy said uncharitably.

"Jen says they will. She says they aren't real folk-dancers. It's ten o'clock, Ros. You'd better go."

"You're not to go on talking to Bidy, then! And it's no use my going," Rosamund grumbled, "for the creature in the room above me comes in at half-past twelve, and drops her boots on my head, and moves her furniture about, and coughs. I can hear every single thing she does. She tramps about in her out-door shoes on the wooden floor all the time she's undressing. I do think ordinary common sense might have made her bring bedroom slippers!" and she went off to her own room, to lie and wait for the dropping of the boots, and to grunt in disgust when it occurred.



“This is a real big *shauri!*” Biddy said happily, and snuggled down among her rugs and coats, and lay gazing into the fire, which they had decided to keep burning for an hour or two, and all night if Biddy felt cold.

“I’ve lots of shillings now! We can afford it,” Maidlin had said.

Biddy, like Rosamund, growled indignantly when the theatre-goers returned an hour after “lights out,” and apparently ran up and down the wooden corridors in high-heeled shoes. Lights had already been flickering across the room at intervals, but there were many more of these now, and she raised herself on her elbow at last, to say to Maidlin, “I say, Maidie! If you have a week of this, you’ll need a rest-cure at the Abbey before term begins! Better come home with me to-morrow night; we’re much quieter in our flat!”

“Still talking?” Joy’s voice sounded in the doorway. “Maidie, what about your promise?”

“We weren’t!” Biddy spoke up hurriedly. “We’ve been quiet for hours and hours. Maidie hasn’t said a word even now. I was swearing at you noisy people, that’s all. I suppose you know you’ve wakened the whole house? Did you have a good time? Did you laugh?”

“Once or twice.” Joy stood in the doorway, night-light in hand, wearing a pale green kimono, her hair hanging over her shoulders in two thick ruddy plaits. “Are you quite warm?”

“Rather! And awfully comfy. Thanks hugely for the rugs. We had another supper after you’d gone!”

“I’m sure you did. Is there anything left? Let me see the little bird in its nest, too!” and Jen, in a blue dressing-gown, looked over Joy’s shoulder, the glow of her candle lighting up her yellow curls.

“Not a crumb! You’ll have to go to bed hungry,” Biddy said hard-heartedly.

“I’m so sorry, Jen! We ought to have kept some for you.” Maidlin sat up in bed, tossing back her mane of black hair.

“We’ve got plenty of biscuits and chocolate,” Joy assured her, and bent to kiss her. “Go to sleep, both of you! If Rosamunda hears us, she’ll be getting out of bed.”

“To join the *shauri!*” Biddy murmured, as Joy closed the door. “Let’s have another shot at it! Perhaps they’ll calm down soon!”

## CHAPTER X

# THE KINDNESS OF THE PIXIE

Very early in the morning, Ruth crept out of her room, felt her way to the kitchen, switched on the light, and put a kettle on the gas. By seven, she was standing by Mary's bed with an early cup of tea.

"Ruth!" Mary sat up with a start. "Oh, you angel! That's a thing I love, but Biddy isn't often up early enough to get it. How did you manage it?"

Ruth sat on the bed, with her own cup in her hand.

"This is my *shauri*! You're to take things easily. Breakfast will be ready for you at a quarter to eight. I'm seeing to everything."

"Oh, nonsense! I'll be up in a second, thanks to this! It's a boon and a blessing, and you're a dear. But you've done enough——"

"My dear Mary-Dorothy, there's nothing left for you to do," Ruth said calmly. "I've been amusing myself in your kitchen for half an hour. Do you think," scornfully, "that a Colonial can't cook? The porridge is boiling, and the scrambled eggs and the toast and the coffee will be ready when you are. *I'm* getting the breakfast to-day!" and she wandered round the room, looking at the brown and gold pottery which Jen had seen fit to consider included in a toilet-set—vases, and candlesticks, bowls, and quaint jars and trays. "What lovely shapes these are! I'm sure this, with the yellow bird on top, is meant to be a powder-bowl, but what have you got in it? Oh! it's brooches and things!" peeping inside the brown bowl, whose handle was a yellow bird's beak on the lid. "And the duckiest little saucers for your pins! Oh, I love this tall straight mug! The shading and the shape are both beautiful! And the dear fat little brown jug!"

"At first I loved the colour in them," said Mary, lying back and watching her with satisfied eyes. "But the shapes are growing on me every day. I believe I'm discovering a new thing; new to me, of course, I mean; a thing I've been blind to. I hadn't realised lines meant so much. Look at the curves of that jar!"

"I love them. I'm sure you can wake up to things like that. They don't mean anything; and then one day they begin to, and they go on, or you go on growing, till they mean a lot."

"And you wonder that you used to be so blind and careless! Line, and form, and colour, and music; I didn't care about any of them a year ago."

"It makes life quite different to be alive, doesn't it?"

"Quite!" Mary assented grimly. "But you've never known what it was to be as dead as I was!"

Ruth was fondling a fat round bowl, deep gold inside, with an owl's head carved on the rim. "You have more of these than Biddy has! There isn't an owl basin in my blue room! Isn't Biddy jealous? Why does Jen have favourites?"

"It isn't that. She said she put in some extra ones for me, one for each article I'd had published, and Biddy should have some, too, when she did anything big; big for her, you know! My stories are little things; but they're big for me. That bowl was for the article you read before you left home. The squatty jar on the mantelpiece was for the Christmas story."

"Jen's rather a dear," Ruth commented, and put the owl basin down tenderly. "Methinks I hear the kettle preparing to boil over! You dress slowly. You'll be stiff when you move," and she ran to the kitchen.

“Stiff!” groaned Mary, as she stepped out of bed and collapsed upon it suddenly. “Are my legs broken? I’ve never felt like this before!”

She hobbled in to breakfast presently, with an exaggerated air of lameness. “I’m crippled for life! At least I was when I got up first. It’s going off a bit now. I’m beginning to think I won’t have to sit out quite everything this morning. The thought of ever dancing again seemed hopeless half an hour ago. Ruth, what a beautiful breakfast! You are good! It is nice to have things done for one!”

“I’m curious to hear how Biddy slept, and how they managed to conceal her this morning, and what Joy and Jen said about it,” said Ruth. “Let’s be early in the hall, so that she’ll have time to tell us!”

“Oh, it was quite easy!” Biddy said airily. “I put on my gymmy and big coat, and my hat, and went down at breakfast time with the rest. Everybody was in tunics, and lots of them had their hats on; I looked like all the rest! I thought I could go in to breakfast with the crowd; but on the stairs a girl who’s in our country class said to me, ‘I didn’t know you were staying here! I didn’t see you at dinner the first night. I thought you lived in London?’ So I thought I’d better not risk any more inquiries. I dashed away from her, on the excuse of seeing if there were any letters for me; there weren’t, you won’t be surprised to hear! While they were all waiting for the gong, I slipped out at the big door and ran for my life, and had eggs and bacon in the tea-shop by the station. I’ll get hold of that girl in class to-day and tell her what I was playing at; she’s a sport; she’ll keep quiet about it! It was fun last night! It’s a gorgeous place, but you don’t get much sleep,” and she gave an eager account of the evening to Mary and Ruth, and the schoolgirl, Margaret, who had come up to ask questions also.

“I’m on my own to-day.” The tall girl explained that her friend, the Writing Person, had a visitor with her for the day. “She’s the artist who illustrates her books; she’s going to watch the classes and sketch figures and positions.”

During the class they saw the artist girl pull out a notebook and make hurried drawings; and in an interval Biddy and Margaret begged to be shown the result.

“There isn’t much to see. It’s only notes,” the artist protested, but good-naturedly allowed them to look.

Biddy gave a peal of laughter. “But they’ve no clothes on! How funny they look! Which am I? Do I look like that to you?”

“Oh, they’ll get their clothes on afterwards! These are only suggestions for figures.”

“That one’s doing capers. And those are circles. I can’t say I recognise any of us!”

The artist laughed and reclaimed her notebook. “You aren’t meant to.”

“All the same, I like your pictures when they’re finished,” Biddy said condescendingly.

“Thanks so much! That’s a load off my mind!”

Joy and Jen were reinforced to-day by another, a slim, black-haired, bobbed girl, smaller than either of them, whom Jen greeted with a subdued shriek of delight and a cry of, “Husband! At last! I was so lonely and quiet yesterday that everybody said I was quite unlike myself!”

“Oh, nobody ever did! You were just the same as usual; and quite as noisy,” Rosamund said indignantly.

“It’s Jacky-boy, Jacqueline Wilmot,” Biddy explained to Ruth. “She and Jen say they’ve been married ever since they were at school together. Now they’ll be satisfied! Jack was away for Christmas and could only get home last night; she lives in London. So she had to miss the first day, poor thing!”

That day, and those that followed it, were much like the first. There were the same classes and the same teachers, but different dances; the morning singing was an endless joy to Ruth, and the short demonstration never failed to thrill her. There was the usual scramble for coffee and biscuits at eleven; the usual hearty meal in the uproarious clatter of the dining-hall; the quiet chats in little groups during the rest interval.

Jen's white vest grew steadily, in spite of the jeers of her companions, who asked every day if she had found a baby folk-dancer to wear it yet.

The Writing Person and the artist friend sat apart from the rest that second day, and talked business, discussing the possible illustrations to a new book.

"I'd have to see that," said the artist. "Couldn't you dance it for me?"

"Well, not here! I'm not giving demonstrations in public! Perhaps in our room, later on, if there's nobody about. Or we'll catch Margaret. She'd do it better. I'm on the look-out for the Pixie. I rather think she's going to scold me."

"Why? What have you been doing?"

"Something happened; a private matter; and I wrote and told her all about it, and how it had made me feel. I think perhaps she'll say I ought to have more Christian charity. She has such a big share herself. She can still say, and feel, that people are dears, no matter what they do.—I'm saying I rather expect you to scold me for my letter," and she looked up at the Pixie, who had slipped quietly through the swing doors, in her little black tunic and yellow coat, and was standing beside them.

"No! Why should I?" the Pixie was decisive and unhesitating in her judgment.

"I thought you might say I ought to be more charitable."

The Pixie's eyes softened as she stood looking down at her, for she knew what had been going on in her mind during Christmas.

"No! One must feel like that sometimes. *I* feel like it. People aren't perfect; they're bound to disappoint us. They've all got faults. But I say, thank Heaven for their faults! I'm looking for Mr.—oh, there he is! I'll talk about that later! I loved your letter," and she was off.

"It is not, as Joy Shirley says, the place for private talks with Pixies!" said the Writing Person. "She has friends everywhere. You can't wonder! She's always ready to sympathise. It was quite hard to get hold of her at the Summer School last August. Everybody used to go and sit on her bed in the afternoon, and pour out their hearts to her. I went once; it was a tiny room, with hardly space to move; but there were three big people in it, all sitting on the bed, and all telling her their troubles. She was curled up on her pillow, dressmaking hard, and listening and talking all the time. And it was always the same. She knows all about everybody, because every one goes to her for comfort and advice. And she always has it to give. I know, for I go, too. She's one of the best!"

But though it was not easy for the Pixie to find time for private conversations during a Vacation School, Jen was one of those who was accorded the privilege. Perhaps it was the tempting bait of a "problem in psychology," a thing she loved, that made the Pixie refuse all other friends that afternoon, and retreat with Joy and Jen, and a pot of tea for three, and a tray of buns and butter and a plate of cakes, to one end of a long table in the dining-room. They turned their backs on the rest of the world, and plunged into the problem.

"Now, Jenny-Wren, what's the matter with you? I do like you in that brown frock! You mustn't always wear blue, you know, even if you have pretty blue eyes! It matters a lot what colours you wear. Colours affect your thoughts. You'll always think alike if you always wear blue."

"Blue thoughts, I suppose?" Joy asked politely.

"My thoughts are anything but blue!" Jen said indignantly.

"Oh, but blue, for you, means your normal mood; happy and jolly and light-hearted. It's such a pretty blue you wear! Don't you find you're more thoughtful in brown? You think about it, and see if your colour doesn't affect your mood, in spite of Joy."

"She doesn't want you always to be happy and jolly evidently, Jenny-Wren!" Joy mocked.

The Pixie's eyes twinkled. "I want her to be everything, an all-round person. I'm glad you've changed for the afternoon; I always do. It looks so much nicer!"

"Jenny-Wren runs to length, not roundness!" Joy murmured, but was suppressed by the victim.

"It's the influence of our country-dance class," Jen explained. "We have such a jolly time, and it's so much like a party and so little of a class, with a very kind hostess instead of a teacher, that we felt too horribly undressed in tunics. Joy said she expected the M.C. to come and turn her out; so to-day we brought frocks along and changed after lunch."

"And felt super-respectable and more partyish than ever," Joy added.

The Pixie knew who was teaching them, and nodded agreement. "She is a dear, isn't she? I love her. I'm glad you're having a good time."

"Oh, we love every minute of it! We wouldn't miss country for anything. But we're gossiping, Pixie, and we came to ask for help. Why is it that we always gossip when we're with you?"

"I love gossip more than anything!" the Pixie confessed. "Well, what's the trouble, Jenny-Wren?"

"It's Mary-Dorothy," Jen said swiftly. "You know my plans for next term? To live with Joy and go to school again? And you remember what you said to us last summer about Mary-Dorothy; how we had rescued her from the inside life of stories she was living in, and how we had to hold her up till she was safely ashore and in no danger of going back? As if we'd thrown a rope and she'd caught it, and now we must hang on to her? And we said we would."

"Yes, I know all that," the Pixie said thoughtfully, her eyes eager and interested. "You've held on to her well, and she's ever so much better, a different person. Look at the good work she's doing! And the way she's taught those children!"

"The trouble is, Jenny-Wren thinks Mary-Dorothy can't live without her," said Joy bluntly.

Jen flushed. "Pixie, it sounds awful, but if you'd seen her face when she heard I was going away! She looked as if I'd knocked her down. We haven't been thinking about holding on to her and keeping her safe, but I feel now that we've been doing it—well, that *I* have!—by just seeing her all the time. I've seen her at club once a week all the autumn, and quite often in between. I like going to the flat to see her and Biddy, and Mother doesn't mind now; so I've often run round there in the evening. I wonder now if I ought to have done it. I feel as if she might have got to depend on seeing one of us, and—and if she doesn't, for quite a long while, I'm not sure what will happen," and Jen looked appealingly at her little friend. "You don't think me a conceited idiot, do you? It's nothing I've done, any more than Joy or any one else; it's only that I've happened to be in town. She's had more chances of seeing me. I'd never thought of it till I saw her look. She looked lost, as if the earth were falling away from her! Only for a moment, of course; then she hid it, and tried to pretend everything was all right, and we've not spoken of it again. Pixie, what *do* you think? Am I imagining it?"

"I should say not. I expect she has learned to depend on you," the Pixie said gently. "Jenny-Wren, Mary-Dorothy loves you. Didn't you know? You mean a lot to her. You stand

for everything that's new, and happy, and healthy, in her life. She feels she owes it all to you. I've heard her say so; she's quite certain and quite frank about it."

"But I haven't done any more than Joy!" Jen protested.

"She feels nearly as much for Joy. I've talked to her, and I know. I made her come and see me at the shop, one day when she had an hour to spare; and I took her out to lunch and made her talk. She thinks the world of you both. Joy's a sort of fairy-tale princess, always doing kindnesses to people who need them, able to do anything she wants, and wanting to do the right sort of things, with the Abbey and the Hall, and her money and her music, all in the background. You can't wonder if Mary sees you both through a kind of glamour. She has a terrific imagination, as we know. You two stirred it into healthy life; she's using it rightly now, and learning to control it; but you can't wonder if it has woven a web of romance about you two. She had never known any one like you. You took her by storm. She loves you both, though she's far too shy to say so; and she looks up to you immensely. Mind you don't disappoint her!"

"But what am I to do?" Jen demanded, looking deeply troubled. Joy's face was distinctly incredulous. She thought highly of the Pixie's judgment, but believed her to be exaggerating this time. "You make me feel as if I oughtn't to go away! But she can't depend on us for ever, Pixie!"

"No. You must go," the Pixie said decisively. "She must learn to do without you. It's like teaching a child to walk. She'll never learn while you hold her hand. You must go away and leave her to get along without you. If she finds she can stand alone, all will be well, and she'll be stronger than she'll ever be while she has you to lean on."

"Yes, but if she can't?" Jen pleaded. "What if she went back, after all this time?"

"Then Joy will send for her into the country, and you'll have to start again. But I don't believe it will happen. *I* think she's got her feet fairly on dry land and will never drown again."

"Oh, but you always expect the best of everybody!"

"I'd rather do that than expect the worst! I'll keep an eye on Mary-Dorothy for you, Jenny-Wren. I'll see her sometimes, and I'll know if she's all right. She doesn't know I know anything about it, of course, so I'll have to be careful. I'll tell you how she's getting on."

"Now Mary-Dorothy's provided for! If you take her up, all will be well!" Joy said dramatically.

Jen's face lit up. "Oh, Pixie, will you? But you have so many people to see after! I know you look after heaps of people!"

"But she isn't happy unless she's mothering somebody," Joy argued. "You know, she used to darn socks for whole regiments in France, long ago, in the War, and wash their shirts, too, the dears! She likes a crowd!"

The Pixie's eyes laughed at her. "Tell Mary-Dorothy to come to my classes. I'll make room for her. She mustn't drop her dancing. Of course, I shan't come up to Jen as a teacher, but I'll do my best."

"Now you're laughing at me!" Jen said indignantly. "But I'll forgive you, if you'll take Mary into your class. That will be topping for her! Then you do think I can go, Pixie? I've been wondering if I ought to give it up, and arrange to stop in town somehow. I don't want to be a pig, and it does feel kind of brutal; as if I were letting her down!"

"Not a bit. You ought to go. It's good for her. You're only giving her the chance to stand alone," the Pixie said briskly. "I believe she'll rise to it, and show you she can get along

without you. She'd have to do it sometime, you know. Having the pretty little cousin there will help; and I'll keep an eye on her. You go off to school again and enjoy yourself, Jenny-Wren! Don't get too many bad marks, or set too bad an example to Ros and Maidie! What fun you'll have! I wish I could be there, too! Now I've got to get home. Are you going in to the lecture? I can't stop for it to-night. I've got some sewing to do. See you to-morrow!" and she picked up her case and hurried away.

"There's Madam!" and Joy and Jen, turning back to the world again, descended joyfully upon their first folk-dance friend, who had just strolled in and was demanding tea.

"There's nothing *but* tea matters at this stage! That's how I feel!" said she.

"But we thought you weren't coming at all! We're missing you fearfully!" Jen cried.

"How do you like being a lady?" Joy mocked. "We always call it 'being a lidy' if anybody sits still and doesn't do her fair share of the work while every one else is busy. 'Look at Jen pretending she's a lidy!' we say; or, 'Rosamund *is* being a lidy to-day!' But it's funny for you! Most unnatural!"

"I've been teaching this afternoon," Madam retorted. "I took the supers."

"Oh! But ought you to?"

"I'm all right. How are you getting on? You seemed very busy over there."

"We were getting reams of good advice," said Jen. "I'm going back to school again. Have you heard? To learn how to wash pots and pans and hem dusters and make gravy. I can't imagine how you make gravy. Does it come out of the thing you're cooking, or do you make it out of something else? You know all these little things now!"

"It depends," Madam said laughing. "And I won't teach you cooking. You can go to some one else for that."

"I'm going. You won't see me at anything in town next term. I won't be allowed to miss school to come to parties!"

"Will they really have you back?" Madam asked, much amused. "I shouldn't have thought they would. I thought you thought you'd grown up years ago?"

"I aged too soon," Jen said sadly. "Oh, they're delighted! I shall be welcomed with open arms by all the staff."

"I doubt it!" Madam sounded sceptical.

## CHAPTER XI

# MARY'S WIRELESS

The Chelsea week drew to a close. Ruth, fascinated by the infectious atmosphere of enthusiasm and enjoyment, went with Mary and Biddy every day, and postponed sightseeing and shopping till the Vacation School was over. Armed with a visitor's ticket for the week, she felt herself part of the School, free to go where she would, and often slipped into other classrooms than Mary's, to watch the Pixie teaching, or the super-advanced people at work, or Joy and Jen with their kindly "hostess-teacher," or the Writer and her schoolgirl in the room with the hand and the dead fish. Her desire to learn the country-dancing, at least, grew steadily, and she began to long for the School to be over so that regular classes might begin again. She made purchases of music and songs and instruction-books in the book-room; and talked to the Secretary in the office; and, being a businesslike person, soon knew as much about the Folk-Dance Society as Mary did.

Biddy repeated her invitation to Maidlin and Rosamund to come and spend a quiet night at the flat; but Joy vetoed the idea decisively; and as the girls were growing used to the ways of the hostel and were sleeping through the late arrival of the theatre-goers, Biddy's argument was taken from her.

The country-dance party, the biggest ever held in London, was a revelation and a new experience to Ruth. Held on the last night of the School, in the great hall of the Imperial Institute, it was a wonderful sight, with its medley of brilliant colours, its constant change and movement. Ruth sat on the platform, until in her excitement she found herself standing on her chair, and watched seven hundred dancers make lines for "Haste to the Wedding" and "Childgrove," rings for "Mage" and "Gathering Peascods," and squares for "Hey, Boys" and "Oranges and Lemons"; for a moment, as the music struck up "Newcastle," the crowded room seemed to clear, as the rings bunched in their centres, and floor-space appeared between the sets; then the circles opened out again and the floor was seen no more. "Sellenger's Round," in three huge rings, each four or five circles deep, was a thrilling sight. Then, with a sigh of regret that it was all over, the hundreds went wearily home to bed; and Ruth said fervently, "I must learn those as soon as ever I can, Mary! I've been dying to dance all evening!"

"It was weird last night!" Rosamund told Biddy next morning. "We didn't get in till eleven, and that was early, because we had the car. Lots of people were later than that. They'd put the lights out at eleven, as usual, and we were all crawling round with nightlights, looking for our own rooms, and filling bottles in the dark; I made a fearful mess in my fireplace! Jen heard some stranded people out in the corridor, who couldn't find their rooms at all; so she went to the rescue with her nightlight, and one of them grabbed it and said, 'Can we have that? Thanks awfully!'—which was rather rough on Jen. She took them to their rooms, but held on to her own light; and then, just when we'd got all our bottles filled by nightlight, suddenly the electric came on, and all the late people had the benefit of it. So we didn't go to bed at once, but made coffee and ate biscuits, all of us in Joy's room, just to get the good of the light."

That morning, with the burden of the exams off every one's mind, brought especially jolly classes, tinged only with regret that the end of the week had come. In the afternoon, at the big demonstration, Ruth saw the blue frocks of the girls of the staff, and the men's baldricks, for



the first time; and sat in rapt enjoyment of an hour's dancing, broken by shouts of delighted laughter from six hundred students when a dreamy demonstrator forgot her hey in "Picking Up Sticks," and had to dash wildly round to get into her place again, crimson with amusement and confusion. Madam, watching from the platform, laughed with the rest, and applauded vigorously when, at the Director's suggestion, the demoralised set came out again to repeat the last figure—"From the arming"—as if they had been a Grade III. class, cheered to the echo by the rest of the staff as well as by the overjoyed students.

"After that very sporting event," said the Director, smiling indulgently, "we will have two morris dances by the men, 'Flowers of Edinburgh,' from Bampton, and 'Lads a Bunchum,' Adderbury."

Then came hurried good-byes on every side, and a rush to catch trains on the part of those long-distance people who had not gone already; while the Londoners, taking things more easily, enjoyed a last sad tea and a last talk before reluctantly separating to their homes. Jen and Jacky-boy saw Joy, Maidlin, and Rosamund off in the car; then joined the Pixie, Mary, Bidy and Ruth for tea, and made it last as long as they could.

"We shall be turned out! Or locked in here till next year," Jen said sadly. "I suppose we shall have to go!"

"Oh, it's used for other things besides us!" Jack said laughing. "They'd find us before next year!"

"Good-night, all! I'm going home to write letters," and the Pixie departed.

"Let's go home and make buttered toast," said Bidy sadly. "We'll give you some, if you'll come, Jen!"

"My mother and my father are expecting me every minute. They were arriving in town last night. So I'm afraid I mustn't, much as I should like to, Bridget. Oh, I say! Isn't it sad that it's all over?" Jen groaned.

And this proposition being accepted unanimously, the party separated and all went sadly home.

Mary and Bidy hung up their tunics regretfully, while Ruth began to make the toast.

"And that's the end of it all for a year, unless we can manage to go in the summer. But that costs more, because it's not in London," Bidy said mournfully, coming to make the tea. "But at least there are Jen's classes—oh, no, I suppose they won't begin again. Oh, bother!"

Ruth glanced anxiously at Mary. But Mary faced the inevitable steadily. "I don't know when we shall see Jen again," she said lightly. "She begins school next week. But she'll come to say good-bye, if she can."

"She's going to be plucky about it," Ruth whispered, to the toast. "She doesn't mean Bidy to know. You'd never think Jen was the biggest thing in life to her! I wonder what she'll do? And how I can help?"

Mary proceeded to help herself, however. She knew intuitively that there was only one safe way for her just now. There were two possible ways before her; and one—to forget Jen; and the blank her going had left, in a plunge into that unreal life Jen did not like—would have been treason and could not be thought of. To escape that, she clung to the refuge Jen had taught her.

"I'm going to be unsociable," she said, after the second tea was washed up. "Don't you want to write home and tell them all about us, Ruth? Or if Bidy likes to take you to the pictures, I won't mind."

Ruth looked at her anxiously. "And leave you all alone? Not likely! What would you do, all by yourself?"

"She's got a scribbling fit coming on," said Bidly. "I know the signs. We'd better go out; she won't speak for hours!"

"Oh, if it's that!" Ruth said, much relieved. "But aren't you too tired to write, Mary?"

"Yes, and much too excited, after that show this afternoon," Mary confessed. "But I think in a day or two I shall want to write *badly*, and I'm going to get ready for it."

"Oh, don't write badly! Nobody will print it!" Bidly teased.

"I shall want badly to write!" Mary corrected herself with dignity. "I expect you to understand little slips of that sort. I'm going to read through my book as far as I've gone, and correct and polish up, and see if I can judge how it strikes me as a whole, so far. Then I'll be ready to start when I really feel I have to."

"And then Ruth and I will have to make ourselves scarce in evenings, for she'll take it very badly when she does begin!" Bidly remarked. "Did that Writing Person tell you to polish it up? I saw you sitting at her feet—not literally, of course!—and pumping her for all you were worth. I nearly came to rescue her, but Margaret said she wouldn't mind, so we all went down into the gym. and had a dance instead."

"I never teased her! I only asked a few questions. She asked how I was getting on; she knew I'd started on a book. Jen gave me away; I never told her! I said it would be difficult to start again, after all the excitement of this week, and that I felt I'd got right away from it and out of the atmosphere of it altogether. She said that was a good thing, and I'd go back to it fresher; but I might find I had to read over the chapters I'd written, before I could pick it up again. So I'm going to do it. And she said, 'Always have a pencil while you're reading it. You'll find things to alter and words you can cross out. If you don't, it means you're too tired to read it carefully, and you'd better put it away; at least, it would with me.' So I'm going to see if it seems interesting, though I know I can't possibly judge," and she settled herself in the big chair, her feet up on another, and a pile of exercise books in her lap.

"And that's good-bye to us!" said Bidly. "Come on to the pictures, Ruth!"

"Gracious, there's a lot of it, Mary! Isn't it nearly done?" Ruth eyed the manuscript with respect.

"I don't know. I hope so. I don't want it to be too long. But I don't know when it's going to stop."

"But can't you stop it?" Ruth asked, with growing amusement.

"Not unless it's the end, silly. It can't just stop anywhere."

"But don't *you* know how it's going to end?"

"I thought I did. But it keeps changing; and things keep coming in. It's quite different from what I thought it would be at the beginning. She—that Writer—says that's all right; and she writes two every year," Mary was growing absorbed in the contemplation of her opening sentence.

"I say, Mary! I'll tell you if it's interesting, if you like!" Ruth wheedled.

Mary laughed. "Perhaps, later on. But I've got to read it myself first."

So Ruth and Bidly took pity on her, or on themselves, and left her.

After the whirl of the last week, with its constant music, its endless change, its meetings with friends at every turn, and all its excitements, the quieter life of the flat was a great change to Ruth, and at first almost a relief. The change began next morning, when Mary went off early to the office and Bidly to college, groaning at the thought of tackling shorthand and

bookkeeping once more; and Ruth sat for a while alone, reading the opening chapters of Mary's story, and then set out for a lonely prowl round London. Good fortune, and some advice from Mary, led her to the Embankment; and she enjoyed the river and the gardens, found the Temple and explored it thoroughly.

It was the first of many solitary jaunts, sometimes to the parks of the north and west, sometimes to the West End shops, sometimes to the city churches, sometimes to museums and picture galleries. But she was thoroughly interested, and never minded being alone; and at night Mary and Biddy heard all her adventures, criticised her route, and told her what she had missed and what she ought to have seen, till Ruth would threaten Biddy with the toasting-fork and throw cushions at Mary.

Mary was working in earnest now, thoroughly gripped by her story; and night after night Biddy and Ruth went out, so that she should be left in peace. It was still holidays so far as classes in folk-dancing were concerned, and "the pictures" would have been their only refuge if Ruth had not developed a passion for 'bus-rides through the lighted streets by night. She loved the long chains of lamps hung, as they seemed, on each side of every road, vanishing in the far distance; and waited eagerly for each cross-street, that she might look down and catch the reflected fairy lights again. Biddy enjoyed these rides also, so, well wrapped up, they went out night after night and boarded a 'bus and went "there and back," no matter where "there" might be. Sooner or later the front seat would fall vacant, and Biddy would make a rush for it; then Ruth would produce chocolates, and they would settle down to enjoy themselves, only leaving their seats at the terminus to find a cup of hot coffee somewhere before starting on the homeward ride. When asked later about any London district, Ruth would say, "Oh, yes! I've been there. I went in the dark, on a 'bus. The lights were lovely!"

The importance of not disturbing Mary weighed heavily on both her and Biddy. Mary's working time—she persisted in considering her writing "work," and nothing else worthy of the name—was so very limited; she was so very eager to get on with her story, now that she had made the new beginning; and the younger girls were both so very anxious that she should. Ruth had been allowed to read the first half of the story, in instalments; Mary had tried a few chapters on her, and had been amused and delighted and embarrassed by Ruth's insistent demand for more *at once*. Ruth was frankly eager to know what happened next, and would go out at any time if that would allow Mary to finish another chapter. Biddy's interest was that of part proprietor; she had helped to suggest the story, which was founded on some of her own experiences at boarding-school; she had discussed it in its earlier stages and knew how it was supposed to end, and how she thought it ought to end. But Mary was proving unexpectedly difficult, and declared herself unable to stick to the arranged plot; it had developed along lines she and Biddy had not foreseen, and she insisted on following out the course of events which seemed to her inevitable, to Biddy's indignation.

"But that's not what we'd decided, Mary!" she wailed one night. "I'm sure the other way was better! What do you want to make her do that for, the silly kid?"

"Because it's what she would do, I'm certain. I can't help it, Biddy. I can't stop her. She did it before I knew she was going to."

"That's silly! It's your story! You can make it go as you like!"

"I'm beginning to wonder if it is mine. Sometimes I think it isn't."

"Whose, then?" Ruth demanded, with round eyes.

"The girls in the book. It's their story, more than mine."

"But you're making it up!" Biddy cried, staring at her uncomprehendingly.

"I suppose so," Mary said doubtfully. "That's not the feeling I have, though. I never have had the feeling of making anything up."

"What do you feel?" Ruth asked curiously.

Mary considered the matter. "That I'm discovering something that exists already. For some reason, I'm the only person who can discover it, and I have to write it down for you to read. But I'm not inventing it. It's there; and I find new bits of it all the time. I can't alter them; I've got to put them down as they come to me. That's really what I feel."

"Like listening-in; but you're the only person who hears that particular wave," Ruth suggested.

"That's it exactly. I want to find out the rest as much as you do. I'm very fond of the girls; I'm sorry when they make a mess of things, but I can't help it. That's the story."

"And there you are! She can't change the story. This is too mysterious for me, Biddy! Let's go out! But I can see why she wants to get rid of us. We interrupt the wireless."

"I wish you'd go, if you're going to chatter," Mary said politely.

"We will, if we may read the new chapter at supper."

"No, that's too soon. Something may happen to alter it. I'm not always sure I've got it right till I've thought it over."

"But you said you couldn't change it!" Biddy argued, while Ruth looked at Mary and shook her head sorrowfully.

But Mary could not explain. "I can't make you understand," she said helplessly. "I might find out something new, that would make me understand what had gone before more clearly, and that might alter it. Don't you see? I'm getting to know the girls better all the time; I feel as if some day I might really understand them.—Oh, do go away, both of you!"

"It's beyond me!" Biddy said frankly. "I'm glad it's your job, not mine. I don't want any private wireless going through me! You never talked like this about the short things you wrote. You just sat down and wrote them!"

"This is quite different!" Mary said with dignity, a touch of shy colour in her face.

"It's much more worth doing!" Ruth said warmly. "And a jolly lot more interesting! Your girls are real and alive; that's why you don't understand them altogether, and why you can't always manage them. And that's why the story's so thrilling, and why it will be published and will be such a big success. I'm panting to know what happened next!"

"So am I!" Mary confessed.

"Let's go out, Biddy! Perhaps she'll find out," and Ruth hurried Biddy away.

## CHAPTER XII

### AN INVITATION FROM JOY

“Letters!” Bidly rushed to the door one evening, about a week after the close of the dancing school. “Letters for all of us, heaps of them! Mary, that’s for you from Jen. Tell us when we’re to see her to say good-bye! A card for you, in such teenywee writing! Whose is it? And big fat letters for all of us, all alike! How weird! What can they be? Here, Ruth!” and she tore open her own letter packet to solve the mystery.

“This is from the Pixie,” said Mary, taking up the card with the neat little writing. “I asked her to let me know when Ruth might go to see her, to see the shop and the hand-woven things.”

“It looks like her,” Bidly conceded. “These are magazines. Are yours the same, Ruth? They’re about folk-dancing; how ripping! But I wonder who sent them to us, and why?”

“I suspect this is the explanation of the mystery,” and Ruth held up a small card. “Haven’t you one too?”

“What is it? Yes, here it is.—Oh! Oh, I say! But I’m not a member! We’ve never been able to afford it yet. But this says I’m a member of the Society for this year!”

“Ruth!” Mary cried accusingly, and tore open her own packet to find the membership card there also. “Ruth, did you pay our subscriptions at Chelsea?”

“Well, they told me about the parties, and I want to go to them—to watch, anyway, and perhaps to join in one or two of the easy dances. But I can’t go alone. You’ve got to take me and look after me. I shall expect you both to dance with me and tell me what to do,” Ruth explained.

“Oh, but you mustn’t! You shouldn’t have done it! We mustn’t let you——”

“Cheers! Oh, Ruth, I do love you!” and Bidly hurled herself on Ruth and hugged her. “Now I can go to parties! I’ve been dying to go for months! Of course I’ll dance with you, and I think you’re a perfect angel, and I’ll love you for ever!”

“Mary, did you say you’d been arranging for me to go and see your Pixie, and her hand-woven dresses and things?” Ruth demanded.

Mary looked alarmed at her tone. “I thought you’d like it. You said you’d like to see the shop. She says you may go to-morrow. But if you don’t want to, you’d better have some other engagement quickly. I’m sorry!”

“My dear, don’t apologise! I’m dying to go. I want to see her again, and I want a frock like those Joy and Jen had. I’d never seen any like them. But don’t you see? You’re doing far more for me than I can do for you, things I could never do for myself. What’s spending a guinea or two, compared with getting me the chance of going to see a person like that? Think of the interesting people you’ve introduced me to! I never dreamt you could do things like that for me. I thought you were going to give me a bed and meals, and tell me how to find my way about London. You’ve taken me into a whole world that’s all new to me. I can never thank you enough. It’s a thing money couldn’t buy. I had no idea what I was coming into. Do you know that since I bought all that music the other day, there’s a background of new tunes to everything I do? The songs we sang at Chelsea, and the dances I watched, go about with me all the time. And I love all your friends. I think the giving has been on your side, not mine.”

“What a topping way to look at it!” Biddy laughed. “Mary’s crushed! She never could argue.”

“It’s nice of you to feel like that,” Mary said doubtfully. “But you mustn’t go on spending your money on us, Ruth. But it will be jolly to have parties to look forward to!” and she flushed. “And you’d like to go to-morrow? Are you really going to have a handwoven frock?”

“I was there when Jen ordered hers,” said Biddy. “The Pixie measures you and makes notes, Ruth, and then she looks at you and snatches up a scrap of paper or the back of an envelope, and makes a tiny sketch of what you’re to look like in the frock, and says, ‘Your collar will go *so!* I shall make the neck like *this!* *That’s* your sleeve; and the pattern will come *here*. I shall give you a waistband *so!*’ and there’s the whole thing planned. Then she does sums, and works out exactly how much pattern they’ll have to weave for you, to the inch, so that there isn’t a scrap wasted. It’s all done in two seconds, and there’s your dress planned out.”

“Ruth, this is for you,” Mary had found an enclosure in her letter from Jen. “It’s from Joy.” She glanced at her own letter. “Jen writes from the Abbey. Oh, but she hasn’t gone yet, surely!” and she began to read hastily.

“She’d never go without saying good-bye!” Biddy cried indignantly.

“But she has gone,” Mary spoke quickly. “This letter is to explain. Joy came up to town as usual; she comes once a week, to take East-End crippled children out into the country in her car,” she explained to Ruth. “She’s been doing it every week for months. She found that Mr. and Mrs. Robins were wanting to start for Paris at once, sooner than they’d intended, and the daughter-in-law had arrived to go with them; so they wanted to get away. So Joy took Jen right away back with her in the car, though school doesn’t begin for another week. This letter is to say good-bye; no, you can’t read it, Biddy. It’s full of good advice to me,” and Mary flushed and laughed. “Jen’s pleased to look on herself as my fairy godmother, and she tells me what she thinks is good for me. We must make up our minds to do without her for some time. I’m sorry you won’t see more of her, Ruth.”

“But I shall, if—if you don’t mind!” Ruth looked up from her note. “Mary, this is from Joy Shirley, and she asks me to go and stay with them at her house. She says I ought to see some English country, as well as London! And she says the snowdrops are in flower in the park. Of course, I’d like to go. It’s exactly what I want; to see all sides of English life! But would you mind? It’s delightful of her to ask me; but it seems horrid of me to go, when you’d like it too and you can’t go.”

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly go,” Mary said quickly. “We’ve been away from work too much already. Oh, you must go, Ruth! I’m glad she’s asked you. It’s a delightful house to stay at. We’ve been several times, and it’s always a great treat.”

“They’re all a little bit mad now and then,” Biddy said wistfully. “I shall be green with envy! It’s the kind of madness I love; ragging, you know, and playing the goat. Ros and Maidie help; at least, Ros does. Maidie’s shy when they get fooling. She doesn’t quite understand how to join in, even now. But Joy and Jen are really awful sometimes! Be sure you look at your bed before you get in! They put brushes in mine. They’re lunatics, both of them, when the fit takes them. Oh, I wish I could go too!” she wailed. “It’s such a jolly house, Ruth! There’s nobody grown up in it, except Mrs. Shirley, and she’s sweet, but she really doesn’t count.”

“I think she counts,” said Mary. “Joy won’t do anything that she knows would worry her aunt. You heard her tell how she gave up smoking to please her. And there have been other

things.”

“Oh, well, it’s a good thing there’s somebody! If there were nobody Joy cared about, there’s no saying what she’d do!” said Biddy truthfully. “Of course you’ll go, Ruth? When does she ask you for? Oh, lucky you!”

“I’d like to go. I’d love to! In fact, I’m dying to go, if you’re sure you and Mary won’t feel too bad,” Ruth confessed. “I don’t expect you to miss me, but I do think you may wish you were with me.”

“We’ll do that all right!” Biddy assured her.

“But we shall miss you, too. You make a big difference in this little place,” Mary added. “But you must go, if it’s only to see the snowdrops! Jen says they’re quite a sight under the trees.”

“At least, I take Biddy off your hands at night! What will happen to your work if I go away?”

“Biddy will settle down, when she hasn’t you to set her off,” Mary retorted. “When do they want you? At once? Joy usually wants things the moment she thinks of them.”

“She says as soon as I can come. They’ll meet me at the station, if I let them know the day and train. Or Joy will take me back in the car next Thursday, if I care to wait till then.”

“I should wait and go in the car. You’d save your fare,” said Biddy.

“I don’t think you should, Ruth. It would be a very cold ride; it’s a long way. It’s not the time of year for motoring in the country. Joy’s had to make her trips with her cripples much shorter, and sometimes give them up altogether, when the weather was too bad. Go by train, and let them meet you at Risborough. You’ll have long enough of the car; it’s some miles from there. Then you needn’t wait a week.”

“I don’t want to wait a week!” Ruth confessed. “But I want to go and order my handwoven frock to-morrow. How would Monday do? There would be time to hear if it suited them.”

“Jen begins school on Tuesday. I’m glad you’re going, Ruth!” Biddy cried. “You will tell us all about it, won’t you? Ros won’t fag to write decent letters; she always says she’ll tell me when she sees me, and she never does. Well, she tries, but it’s not the same. And Maidie’s no good at letters; she’s too stiff and stilted when she writes. She won’t let herself go. That’s why I’m going to be her private secretary. I *can* write letters; it runs in the family! You must be able to, too. So you will tell us all Jen says about school, and how she gets on, and everything, won’t you?”

“It’s a big order! I’ll do my best,” Ruth promised earnestly. She had heard all about Biddy’s plans for her own future as secretary to Joy’s adopted heiress.

“There’s another thing you might tell us,” Biddy went on thoughtfully, her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, as she gazed at Ruth. “I want to know if that man’s back yet, and if he’s still hanging round Joy, and if he proposes again, and what she says this time, and all about it.”

“Biddy!” Mary said indignantly.

“It’s because I’m so fond of her. I’m naturally interested. We’re sure he proposed last summer; Ros and Maidie both think so. But whether Joy sent him away altogether, or whether she told him she’d think about it later, we don’t know. I guess Jen knows, but she doesn’t talk about it.”

“I don’t see any need for you and Ros and Maidie to talk about it, either. It’s none of your business.”

“Oh, but we want her to have everything she wants! She always does get all she wants; she always has done. If she likes him, she’d better marry him and be ‘My Lady,’ and join up the Manor and the Hall. Wouldn’t it make a jolly place, all thrown into one? We don’t want Joy to marry anybody, but Joan and Cicely seem to like being married, and we don’t want Joy to miss anything.”

Mary laughed. “I’m glad you children are prepared to be nice and kind about it, if it should come off!”

“Maidie hates the thought of it. But he did save her life, and she can’t say he didn’t. Of course, he isn’t good enough for Joy, but then no man ever is good enough for a girl you like.”

“You leave me gasping!” said Ruth helplessly. “I had no idea Joy was concealing a love-story! Who is he, please? Would you mind giving me a few details?”

“We don’t know if it is a love-story. That’s the point,” Bidy explained. “We can’t ask her, of course. He’s the lord of the Manor, and Joy’s the lady of the Hall; and the Hall and the Manor are next door—most romantic! He’s Sir Andrew Marchwood——”

“A bold bad baronet? How thrilling!”

“His brother died last year, and he came into the title. He’s been a great traveller, and out of England for years,” said Mary. “The Manor has been shut up all the time Joan and Joy were growing up, at the Abbey; the Abbey belongs to Joan, and is in the grounds of the Hall. Now this man and his mother have come to live at the Manor, less than a year ago.”

“And last summer, when we trespassed in his garden and all fell into the lake, he fished us out and brought Maidie back to life when she was drowned,” Bidy supplemented. “He carried her home, and then he carried me, because I’d wrenched my ankle, falling out of the tree; and he said I was a lot heavier than Maidie. And when he sent word to Joy that Maidie wouldn’t die, she said she loved him. But I guess that was only at the moment. She was nearly off her head with fright about Maidie.”

“And you want me to tell you how his courting is getting on?”

“He’s been abroad again, all the autumn. We don’t know for certain, but we rather think he proposed to Joy last summer; and she either sent him away for six months, while she thought about it, or else she said ‘No’ straight out. Anyway, he went off to Africa to shoot creatures, and so far as Ros and Maidie know, that’s the end of him. But he may come back; and then things might happen. So I thought you’d better be prepared.”

“Thanks very much!” Ruth said laughing. “I can’t say that Joy seemed to me to be pining for anybody!”

“Oh, but you can never tell!” Bidy said sagely.

Ruth’s visit to the Pixie was paid next day. They met at a busy corner in the West End, and lunched together at a quiet table in a big restaurant; Ruth would have liked to sit out on the balcony and watch the traffic, but that was not possible in January.

“Come again in June!” said the Pixie hospitably. “Now tell me! How is Mary Devine going to get on without Jen Robins? Is she pining for her? How is she? Does she seem unhappy?”

Ruth’s face showed her surprise at this understanding of the situation; she had not realised the subtlety of the ways of Pixies, and that she had been invited as much to discuss Mary as for her own sake.

“She’s missing Jen,” she said cautiously, anxious not to betray Mary, and not sure how much the wily little person knew. “But she isn’t pining. She hasn’t time; she’s working too hard.”



“At her writing? Or do you mean only at the office?” the question came anxiously.

“No, I mean at her book. She’s at it every night, and she’s getting on with it fast.”

“Oh, *good!*” There was real heartfelt relief in the Pixie’s delighted voice. “That’s what she ought to do. I *am* so glad she’s taking it that way. That will keep her safe. Now she’ll be all right! Jen will be glad!”

“Safe from dreaming, do you mean? I didn’t suppose you knew.”

“She doesn’t know I understand. Don’t tell her! She wouldn’t like it. They told me; Joy and Jen. They came to me when she’d told them about it, because they didn’t understand. She mustn’t go back to it, you know. You must watch her; Biddy doesn’t understand, and it’s better she shouldn’t. It was unhealthy; it was ruining Mary. They’ve saved her from it, and she’s making a fine fight. But she mustn’t go back to it again.”

“I don’t think she will. She feels it was bad. And she’s very anxious not to disappoint them.”

“Did she tell you all about it?” the Pixie asked eagerly. “Oh, then, I think she’s safe. She wouldn’t talk about it if there were still any danger in it for her. And her work is the thing that will save her; that, and her wish to satisfy those two. She thinks the world of them. You’ve seen that, of course?”

“Yes. Is it all right for her to think so much of them?” and Ruth found herself taking her doubts and perplexities to the Pixie, as so many did. “She idealises them. I’ve told her so. Suppose they fail her?”

“She’s got to risk that. It’s good for them, too. They know how much she thinks of them; or some of it!—and they’ll try to live up to it. Oh, it’s good for her! She must have ideals, heroes or heroines; her imagination needs it. She’s all imagination, you know. Once it ran away with her; now she’s holding the reins again. But it must have some one to weave romances round, and Joy and Jen are very sane, healthy objects for her to idealise. That’s all right! It may break her heart if they disappoint her some day; but I hope not. By that time she may be strong enough to stand without them. And they may never fail her. Now come along and choose your frock!”

“Oh, but I can’t!” Ruth wailed, when the hand-woven goods were spread before her. “I want them all!”

“That’s what Joy Shirley said. You mustn’t have them all, for they wear for ever, you know!”

“Oh! What a simply heavenly green! Oh! I’ll have that! Take all the rest away!” Ruth begged.

The Pixie swept the materials aside. “It’s the green of a beech leaf in early spring, and the pattern is the beech brown of autumn. It’s a lovely thing. I’ll make it like this!” and Biddy’s forecast came true, for she sketched the frock on the spot, altering details to please Ruth, till all the points were settled.

In her workroom upstairs they sat and talked, Ruth sitting on the floor, because every seat was piled with frocks in various stages of progress.

The Pixie ran up seams on the sewing-machine, caught up a crochet-hook and joined bodice and skirt together or ran round a neck; then turned to another frock and began to unpick.

“She didn’t like it after it was done; she wants the skirt longer. She’s wrong; but I must do what she wants. Oh, dear!” she sighed. “How beautifully I do sew! I only find it out when I have to pull something to pieces.”

“Hard lines!” Ruth said laughing, and watched her flying fingers.

“And you’re going to stay at the Abbey with them? Good! Give them all my love!”

“Ought I to go?” Ruth queried, as Jen had done. “You told me to help Mary. It feels like deserting her.”

“She’ll pull through. If she’s working, she’ll be all right. Oh, you ought to go! Of course you must go. But write to her, you know. Don’t let her think you’ve forgotten her.”

“I do want to go!” Ruth confessed. “I’m looking forward to it tremendously!”

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE MEETING AT THE STATION

The train drew in to the station at Princes Risborough; and Ruth looked eagerly for Joy and her car. All the way from town, she had been delighting in the sheer simple fascination of the old English names of the stations—"Greenford"—but there was no one to tell her it was really "Greenford Parva"!—Ruislip and Ickenham—Beaconsfield—Saunderton—and now Princes Risborough! This was England indeed!—and an England full of history; for a lady in the carriage, seeing her delight and interest, and learning she was a Colonial, had pointed out Hughenden, and the way to the Chalfonts and Penn and Jordans and Hampden; and Ruth almost expected to see the red plumes of Prince Rupert's horsemen appear on the hills, or the orange scarves of the Roundheads making a patch of colour on the brown fields. History and England were coming to life for her that day, as they had often done during her sightseeing in London; and she was excited and very happy.

But instead of Joy, it was Jen who hailed her and hauled out her suitcase. "I'm ever so glad to see you! Please excuse Joy; she'll meet us with the car at our own little station. She had to take Mrs. Shirley out this afternoon, to see an old friend who has been very ill; Joy will never disappoint her aunt if she's set her heart on anything. So she asked me to meet you and apologise. I've been in to school to interview my head-mistress. I begin school to-morrow morning, you know."

Ruth laughed, as they crossed the platform to the motor train awaiting them. "Oh, what a jolly little train! And are you looking forward to school? Was she nice?"

"Oh, topping! I've always loved her. It's three years since I left. But"—ruefully—"she wants me to swot at French and music, besides the household stunts! I was keen on the cookery; and mildly interested in the housework, and quite luke-warm about the dressmaking; but I'm positively chilly towards French, and I've no feelings at all, except frozen horror, towards music, if I've got to do it myself. I love to dance to music, and I love singing and my pipe; but that doesn't seem to satisfy Mackums; sorry, I mean Miss Macey! She wants me to *practise!—regularly!* Me! I never do anything regularly nowadays! I told her so. I've got out of the way of it. One does at home."

"And what did she say?" Ruth asked, laughing.

"Said I was young enough to begin again. I'm beginning to wish I'd said I'd just have holidays with Joy. I don't know quite what I've let myself in for! Mackums and I had a regular fight, and, of course, I got squashed; and I'm to go to French classes, and do verbs and translation and conversation as if I were an infant!"

Ruth laughed again, in sympathy. "That is hard lines! Must you really do it?"

"Mother wanted me to," Jen said gloomily. "And daddy said it would be good for me. Pig! I'll write him a *nice* letter! I shall be old and bent and gray with study if I have three months of it!—I say! There's the Cross! Look out at this side and you'll see it!"

Ruth gazed at the strange white cross far up on the hillside. "How queer! What is it made of?"

"Chalk; it's cut out of the turf. That's at Whiteleaf; there's another on this side at Bledlow."

"More dear old names! I do love them so! I've been enjoying them all the way from town."

"We began at the Whiteleaf Cross," Jen said dreamily. "Not I, of course. I came into the club later; I was just a kid. But Cicely Hobart formed the Hamlet Club while she was living in Whiteleaf, and the Cross was the club's first badge. We still have meetings up there sometimes. You've heard of the Hamlet Club? It brought us all together, and kept us friends, even after we'd left school; we all went to Miss Macey's, in Wycombe. We learned our first dancing in the Hamlet Club, and Cicely and Joy and Joan were all May Queens in turn. Rosamund is the Queen of the moment. Didn't Mary and Biddy tell you all that ancient history? How is Mary-Dorothy?"

"Very well and very busy. I steal each new chapter of her book when it's finished. That was the only thing that made me hesitate about leaving London!" Ruth assured her. "It seems such a long while to wait for the rest of the story!"

Jen's face had lit up. "She is working at it, then? Oh, I *am* glad! And you really like it? You think it's good?"

"I get wildly excited over it, so I think it must be good! The girls are so real; that's what I like about it," Ruth said warmly.

"Yes, I felt that. She let me see the beginning, when I'd teased her for weeks. She was shy about it, but I got it out of her at last. She feels things so, and they're so real to her, that I think her work ought to be very good, though I'm no judge," Jen, speaking soberly, seemed in a moment years older, and almost motherly in her tone; the indignant schoolgirl was gone, for the time being. "I'm hoping, *and* expecting, great things for Mary-Dorothy from this book! If it does well, it will just be the making of her. To feel she has done something big, some good work, is what she needs. It will give her some opinion of herself, and make her more able to meet people. At present she distrusts herself altogether. I'm going to be as proud as if it were my own book! And that's saying a good deal."

"Mary says it will be half yours and half Biddy's," Ruth ventured. "She looks on you as her fairy-godmother."

"Oh, I am! That's understood!" Jen said, laughing. "But she must allow herself a little share in her own book! Now here we are at our little station. But where's Joy? If she's left us to walk, I'll never forgive her! That would be past a joke! She couldn't let us down so horribly.—Oh! Oh, I *say*!"

"What's the matter?" Ruth had been forced to lift out her own case, for Jen had forgotten hers. "What lovely horses!" she added, as a big carriage drove up to the station gate.

Jen was staring at the horses, too, as if fascinated. Then her eyes swept the little platform, and Ruth saw them fill with amused delight and surprise.

A tall man had been the only other traveller to leave the train, which had been delayed while a pile of luggage was taken out of the van. He stood giving directions as to this, while a couple of travelling bags were being placed in the carriage.

Jen's surprised eyes rested on him, in delighted anticipation. Ruth, looking from her to him, knew who he must be, and was seized with joyful amazement at her own good luck. Was she to see the end of Joy's romance, after all?

Jen turned reluctantly to look for the car, with a sigh. "Why, oh, why did I say I'd go to school this term?" she murmured, under her breath; then remembered the stranger present and pulled herself together. "That wretched Joy isn't here yet. Isn't it too awful of her? Of course,

Eirene—that's the car—may have broken down. Shall we wait or walk? The walk's all right in summer, when we can go through the woods, but it's awfully muddy now."

She looked round in anxious indignation for some sign of Joy. Ruth was beginning to say that she would enjoy the walk and she did not mind the mud, when the traveller turned from his carriage and came towards them.

"Can I give you a lift to the Hall, Miss Robins?"

Jen's face grew radiant. "How jolly of you! You are kind! Joy's let us down badly; she promised to be here. We would be so grateful." She turned to Ruth, to introduce Sir Andrew Marchwood—"Our next-door neighbour. Miss Devine is coming to stay at the Hall. This seems a poor welcome to give her! But your kindness will make up for it."

"I am glad to be able to help," said he, and made room for Ruth's case and helped the girls in.

Jen, lying back luxuriously on the cushions, said warmly, "It's very nice of you! We didn't know you were expected home. Have you had a pleasant trip? And shot lots of creatures?"

"It has been interesting——"

Then a car flashed past them, as the carriage climbed the hill; and both girls caught a glimpse of the amazed indignant consternation in Joy's face. She could not pull up all at once, but turned as soon as she could and came up alongside them.

"Sorry I was late!" she cried, her astonished eyes going from Jen, placid and amused, to Sir Andrew, whose grave face showed no change of feeling. "We had engine trouble, and got hung up outside Thame. But she's running all right now. Awfully good of you to come to the rescue!" to Sir Andrew. "I'll take them off your hands now."

"Oh, we're very comfortable! It's a pity to disturb us and stop the horses!" Jen said lazily. "You can follow on, and we'll get in with you when Sir Andrew drops us at the gate. When he's been so kind, we couldn't think of deserting him."

"Jenny-Wren, I'll come in and shake you!" Joy began.

"Oh, but you haven't been asked! And you can't leave Eirene! You will defend us from her and take us as far as the Hall, won't you?" she appealed to their host.

His assurance of the pleasure it would give him to do so was cut short by Joy's exit from the discussion. Her car shot forward and vanished round the bend of the road.

Jen grinned wickedly. "Now I've done it! She'll leave us to walk up the avenue, and it's half a mile, and very damp."

"If you will allow me, I will drive you to the door, and thereby, no doubt, incur Miss Shirley's deeper displeasure," said Sir Andrew grimly.

"Oh, we couldn't think of troubling you! Ruth will like to see Joy's beech avenue. I don't think it's you Joy's wild with! It's me!"—the schoolgirl had suddenly come uppermost in Jen. "And I'm used to it; it doesn't affect me in the slightest."

But her protests were not needed, for at the gate of the Hall they found the car waiting. Joy had remembered that it was undignified to threaten to shake people in public, and had had time to conceal her feelings.

"Jump in!" she said briefly. "Oh, we couldn't think of troubling you any further, thank you very much! You took me by surprise," she went on politely, as Ruth's case was lifted from the carriage, and Jen reluctantly consented to transfer herself to the car. "I didn't know you were coming home yet. I hope Lady Marchwood is well?"

"She is well, thank you. I expect her here to-morrow," said the man of few words.

"Aunty will come to call. Thank you again for rescuing these two!" and with a nod Joy turned to her steering-wheel.

Ruth had looked for an outburst of anger, or at least remonstrance, from Joy as soon as they had entered the avenue; but she had not allowed for the fact that Joy was more surprised, and perhaps disturbed, by Sir Andrew's unexpected appearance than annoyed by Jen's teasing. She had already forgotten her irritation in the new factor which had entered into her life during the last five minutes; she knew, better than either of the others, that her life had perhaps been changed by that unlooked-for meeting.

She did not refer to the incident again, but turned to Ruth with another apology for being late. Jen raised her eyebrows in amused disappointment, but was too good a friend to make pointed comments.

"Jen looked after me splendidly," Ruth assured her hostess. "Is all this really your garden? What wonderful old trees! But you promised me snowdrops. Where are they?"

"Look under the trees, carefully," and Joy slowed down. "You must see them in the morning, in sunshine."

"Oh, but I can see them now!" Ruth peered into the dusk, and found the moss beneath the trees carpeted with snowy stars. "Why, there are thousands of millions of them!"

"We don't do things by halves," Jen explained. "When we really set out to grow wild flowers in England, we aren't satisfied with anything less than thousands of millions. There are gold stars, too, but you can't see them in the dark."

"Golden winter aconite," said Joy. "Among the snowdrops they're rather a jolly sight. But you'll be catching cold. You shall have all the snowdrops you want in the morning."

"Could I have a few, really?" Ruth begged.

"To send to Bidy and Mary-Dorothy?"

"Yes, and your little Pixie-lady, for herself and the weaving girls in the shop."

"Oh, you've been there, have you? How many frocks did you order?"

"Only one, at present. But I shall have more. I wanted to give Mary and Bidy one each, but they were so much upset at the idea that I had to give it up,—for the time being!"

Joy laughed. "You shall pick and pack for them all to-morrow morning, while I attend to my letters," she promised. "The children will be at school, of course! I was afraid you'd be dull."

Jen made a face at her. Then she wailed, "Oh, 'Traveller's Joy!' You don't know what you're in for. I think I'll run away to sea! Or back to town! I'm sure Mary-Dorothy would put me up. What do you think? Mackums insists that I'm to practise regularly! Scales, my dear! And arpeggios!"

"Not on my piano; no, you don't!" Joy said emphatically. "It's not for children to practise on. Besides, I won't have Auntie tortured. You can strum on the old one upstairs, as Rosamund does."

"You let Maidie use yours!" Jen said indignantly.

"Only sometimes. And you're not Maidie. Your great fist's a very different thing from Maidie's fingers. You'll practise upstairs, where we won't hear you, my child. Here's the house, Ruth, but you'll see it better in the morning. We may call you Ruth, mayn't we? After that week at Chelsea, it would seem so stiff to go back to 'Miss Devine'!"

"Oh, please don't! Please do!" Ruth begged eagerly. "It feels so much more like being adopted, and I want to be adopted by everybody! I want to forget I'm a lonely orphan, and a stranger in a strange land. I never have felt strange; England is all so friendly!"

"I'm glad you find it so! We must live up to that. I'll show you my house properly in the morning," and Joy brought the car to a stand before the big door.

"There is a lot of it!" Ruth said, awed and astonished. "It's what I've read of and dreamed of, a real old country mansion. I've longed to see one. No wonder Mary always thinks of this place through a haze of romance and glamour!"

"She does, does she?" Joy was opening the door. "You'll like the house. It's the real thing—Tudor; there's nothing makeshift about it."

"And nothing modern except the electric light, and the telephone, and the gas fires, and the drainage, and the furniture, and the people in it!" Jen mocked, following with the suitcase.

But Joy's love and pride in her home were undisturbed, and plain to Ruth's eyes. "One must be comfortable! Here's our little family. You know them all, except Auntie."

The great square hall, with its family portraits and panelled walls and the wide oak staircase, was warmed by two blazing wood fires on open hearths. A round table was drawn near one of these for tea, and Mrs. Shirley, a dainty but frail little lady, sat near this to preside, as soon as the greetings were over. Rosamund and Maidlin came rushing down the stairs to welcome Ruth, and in ten minutes were waiting on her with scones and bread and butter and tea, and she laughingly felt the "friendliness" of England once more. She had been allowed five minutes in the beautiful bedroom which, she was told, Mary and Bidy always used when they came to the Hall. When she went down again, she found that Joy had changed from her motoring clothes to the pretty brown handwoven frock Ruth had admired at Chelsea, with its patterns woven in bronze, that matched her flaming hair, and dull old gold; and Jen had put off her jumper and very short school skirt, and wore her patterned blue and amethyst.

"Mine's going to be vivid green, with patterns in gold and russet!" Ruth said proudly, as she sat down.

"How jolly! Will it come while you're here?" Rosamund asked eagerly.

"That depends how long she stays here," Jen pointed out. "The longer we keep her, the more likely we are to see her green and russet frock. Oh, I say! I must tell you about school!" and she plunged into her story of the interview with Miss Macey.

"I thought Mackums would win," Rosamund remarked. "She's very persistent. If she says French, you do French! Never mind, Jen dear!" patronisingly. "I'll help you with your verbs! And I dare say you'll find it will all come back to you before long!"

"A good lot of it was never there at all," Jen groaned. "Maidie, I shall be put down and down till I find myself in your class! If I get put below you, I shall go out and bury myself in the playground."

"You can't go much lower than me. I'm always last in French," Maidlin came to offer her cake as a consolation. "And they all say, 'You ought to be good at French!' because I've an Italian name. I don't see it. I didn't inherit French grammar."

"Some day, quite soon, Maidie and I are going for our holidays to a French village somewhere," said Joy, "and I shan't speak one word of English till we've landed at Dover again. Then she'll soon pick it up."

"Will it be for a fortnight? Won't I be able to speak to you for a fortnight?" Maidlin asked sadly.

"Oh, girls! Mrs. Shirley!" Jen had forgotten the biggest bit of news; but Joy had not, Ruth thought. "Who—*whom!*—do you think we met at the station just now? The old man from the Manor—I mean, Sir Andrew! He's home again! Did any of you know he was coming?"

Ruth, well primed in the situation, thanks to Bidly, saw “the children’s” swift looks at Joy; Rosamund excited and eager, Maidlin obviously dismayed.

Joy rose and put down her cup. “Auntie dear, I told him you would call on Lady Marchwood. She isn’t coming till to-morrow. She’s very well. Jen, you might show Ruth anything she cares to see to-night; I’ll take her round properly in daylight. I’m going out,” and she left them staring at one another.

“Out? At this time? But it was dark ages ago!” cried Rosamund.

“ ‘Please note! I will *not* be teased about Sir Andrew Marchwood! Things are getting serious!” Jen said sadly.



## CHAPTER XIV

# ROSAMUND'S REVENGE

“Oh, Jen! Do you think she’s going to have him?” Rosamund cried eagerly.

“I wish he’d stayed away,” Maidlin sighed, and gazed into the fire, her black hair falling across her face.

Ruth looked from one to another of them, her eyes bright with interest. Mrs. Shirley’s face was very grave, without Rosamund’s excitement; and Ruth wondered if perhaps she knew more than the girls did.

But at that look on Ruth’s face, Jen remembered that they had a visitor, who was not one of the family yet; and she mentally called herself a thoughtless idiot. She rose briskly. “Shall I show you things, Ruth? Since Joy’s given me the chance, I may as well take it. As a rule, she wants to show people round herself. Come and explore the house from attic to cellar!”

“Yes, that’s the Abbey,” she said, as they stood in her room, looking out over the garden, lit up by a full moon. “You can just see the ruins at this time of year; in summer you see only trees. Those are the windows of the refectory. Would you like to do something wildly original?” and she began to laugh.

“I’d love it! What can we do?”

“I’ll take you to see the Abbey for the first time by moonlight. We’ll go by the secret passages, of course,” Jen said, laughing. “It’s a most unusual thing to do! Most people go through the Abbot’s garden, or by the big gateway; and, of course, in daylight.”

“I’d love to see it first by moonlight! But will Joy mind? Won’t she want to show it to me herself?”

“Oh, no, not the Abbey! It’s Joan’s Abbey, you know. Joy likes it *very* much!—but it’s her house she loves. Every stone and every corner of it! All right! Get your big coat and come down to the hall. And escape the infants, if you can. We can’t go in a chattering crowd.”

Rosamund caught them on the stairs, however, and this ruthless sentence had to be repeated with emphasis, to her vast indignation. “Chattering! Who chatters half as much as you do, Jen Robins?”

“You. Twice as much,” Jen said politely. “I’d take Maidie, but I won’t have you. No, I mean it, Rosamunda!”

Rosamund pouted, but dared not go too far, since she knew that Joy would certainly take Jen’s part in such a matter, and the two together were too much for her. She caught Maidlin, and drew her into a corner to pour out her indignation; and Jen said grimly, “They’ll plot and plan some fearful vengeance. We’d better look in our beds to-night. Here’s a torch; I’ve another, so we shan’t be left in the dark. I was caught that way once; so now I never go underground without at least two torches!”

She pushed back a strong little bolt and unlocked a door, almost invisible in the panelling; and led the way, by steps, and a narrow passage, and another door, and more steps, and a much longer passage, till Ruth felt she had been wandering underground for hours.

“Are you sure you know where we are? It’s most mysterious! And thrillingly exciting! It’s just what that old house needs to make it perfect! But what a place for stories and romance! No wonder Mary’s fascinated by it!”

"It appealed to her very much. Oh, we aren't lost! We often come. But we felt lost the first time. Come and have a first peep in here!"

They had passed the parting of the paths and had reached a flight of steps leading upwards. Jen passed these also, and led Ruth into the crypt, and threw her light around to show the Saxon pillars and the tomb of the first Abbot.

"It all lay buried here beneath the Abbey for centuries, and no one suspected its existence. Then one day we found it. How thrilled we were! There were wonderful jewels, too, in a hole in the ground. Now come up to the moonlight!"

"Oh!" breathed Ruth, as they crept round the corner of the chapter-house, and saw the cloister garth, and the cloisters beyond, and the high arched windows of the refectory, and the low Norman doorways, and the beautiful Early English chapter-house behind them, all dreaming in the light of the full moon. "Oh, I am glad you brought me to-night! It couldn't be more beautiful in sunshine! I'm glad to see it first like this!"

"It's very jolly in sunlight, though. We once danced here by moonlight, to the music of a fiddle," Jen said reminiscently. "The fiddle was very sweet, but listen to this!"

She had picked up her little morris pipe, only a foot long and made of dark brown wood, as she came through the hall to the secret door. She put it to her lips, holding it in the third and fourth fingers of her left hand and playing on the three holes with the thumb and first two fingers; and a stream of clear high notes drifted across the garth, sweet and strong, a lilting morris jig.

Ruth listened entranced; the melody seemed to turn the moonlight into music. "I've heard of your English nightingales," she said, as Jen paused for breath. "Are they anything like that? Oh, please go on! I heard you on the stair, at Mary's flat. I've been longing to hear the pipe again!"

"That was 'Ladies' Pleasure,' " said Jen. "I'll play you 'None-So-Pretty.' "

"Even the names fit in!" Ruth exclaimed. "Couldn't you—oh, couldn't you dance one of them for me, there on the grass?"

Jen looked at the garth, and hesitated. "One oughtn't to; but I don't believe they'd mind. They know how we love the garth! It was the graveyard of the old monks, you know. But that was so very long ago!" She put the pipe into Ruth's hand, slipped off her big coat, ran out into the moonlight, and began to dance.

Ruth had seen "Ladies' Pleasure" at Chelsea and recognised it; she saw it again later on, but never lost her picture of the Abbey ruins in the white light, the shining columns and arches, the frosty grass, and tall Jen, in her blue frock and bobbing yellow curls, dancing alone, her hands circling before her face, then thrown wide to balance, and then flung straight up as she jumped, and out again as she swung lightly back, swaying from foot to foot. She paused a second, and then began to dance "None-So-Pretty," clapping her hands softly and touching her cheeks and breasts, then springing lightly with swinging arms in her morris step.

"You lunatics!" A voice at Ruth's elbow woke her from her dream with a start, and she turned to stare at Joy, who stood in a low doorway near the chapter-house.

"I'm sure we're not! We were feeling most poetical!" Jen said indignantly, slipping on her coat again. "Why did you go and spoil my jig? Where have you been, anyway?"

"In the sacristy. I heard your pipe," Joy said abruptly.

"Oh! But what is there to do in there, all in the dark?"

" 'Tisn't dark to-night. I was sitting up in the rose window. I always have sat there, ever since I was a kid," Joy said briefly.

“With occasional descents to earth!” Jen mocked. “Sitting in the rose window by moonlight! How romantic, ‘Traveller’s Joy’! Quite as bad as my jig on the garth!”

“Don’t be an ass,” Joy said irritably. “Come and see my window-seat, Ruth. It’s one of my favourite spots.”

“Ruth said I was like a nightingale when I piped,” Jen said haughtily.

“Go and nightingale some more, then! I’m going to show her round.”

As Ruth followed to see the great rose window, and then was led to the dormitory, the refectory, the Abbot’s garden, and every corner of the ruins, she kept hearing the high sweet notes of the pipe, as Jen walked round and round the cloisters and poured out country-dances, morris tunes, jigs, and folk-song airs. “I shall always hear that clear, weird music when I think of your Abbey!” she said, as Joy led her homewards through the old gate and the garden of the Hall. “An Abbey haunted by nightingales and a dancing sprite!”

“A good hefty sprite!” Joy said scathingly. “The music and the moonlight may have been ghostly, but there’s something quite solid about Jenny-Wren!”

“Rosamunda, if you’ve put black beetles in my bed, you may just go and take them out again,” Jen said suggestively, as they entered the hall.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Rosamund jeered.

“What’s she been doing, Maidie?”

“We heard the pipe,” Maidlin said evasively.

“Were you dancing in the Abbey?”

“Only a little jig or two,” and Jen went leaping up the stairs to find the traces of Rosamund’s vengeance. “Come and help me, Ruth!”

They searched Jen’s room together, but found bed, nightdress, and wardrobe untouched. “Rosamunda’s decided to be original!” Jen said grimly. “She’s sniggering downstairs all the time, of course! We must e’en seek till we find the damage, that’s all!”

“Perhaps she’s done nothing,” Ruth suggested.

“And means me to spend all night looking for it, you mean? ’Tis possible!” Jen said sadly. “She’s quite capable of it. But how are we to know? You’re quite sure there’s no dead mouse in the bed?”

A rigorous search revealed no damage anywhere. Rosamund, cross-questioned by Jen, asserted that she had “done nothing at all to the old room or bed.”

“Well, what have you done to anything of mine?” Jen demanded, suspicious and indignant, but vague.

“Go and find out!” Rosamund retorted.

“Stop squabbling, you two!” Joy said, her tone peremptory, and went to her piano.

As she listened to the music and gazed at Joy, Ruth’s thoughts were busy. First with Rosamund; what had the monkey done to tease Jen, who was looking worried and anxious still? Then with Jen herself; such a queer medley of teasing schoolgirl and thoughtful grown-up, neither one nor the other for very long at a time. And during all her stay at the Hall, Ruth found amusement in watching Jen, and wondering which side of her would be uppermost next; for Jen, professing to have been “grown-up and ancient” for three years, had deliberately decided that to go to school again meant to put off the dignity of her nineteen years; and most of the time, in spite of her size, she behaved as if on a level with Rosamund and Maidlin. At the moment, however, she was serious enough, as she lay back in the corner of a high-backed settle, her eyes on Joy; and Ruth, following her look, did not think she was troubling about Rosamund’s misdeeds, but about graver matters.

Her own thoughts followed Jen's. Joy was, after all, the centre of their interest, the head of the house. What was she going to say to that grave man who lived next door? She had gone to the rose window in the Abbey to think out her answer, and the notes of the pipe had interrupted her. "Ladies' Pleasure!" What would this lady's pleasure be? Rosamund had hinted—they had all seemed to know—that he had come for his answer.

Ruth felt that, as such a new friend, she could ask no questions. She was not supposed to understand. Bidy had enlightened her, but no one here knew that. She could only wait, and hope to hear the rest of the story in time. Would Joy tell Jen what she was going to do? Did Mrs. Shirley know? She had been looking grave all evening. Was it that she did not want to lose her niece? Or did she know that Joy did not mean to marry yet? Ruth felt she would give anything to know; to go up to Joy at the piano and say, "Are you going to marry that man?"

Jen rose; and Ruth started, wondering if her wild thought would come true. But Jen's mind had made one of its swift leaps, urged to it by a nervous giggle from Maidlin in response to a whisper of Rosamund's. To tell the truth, Jen's inaction was making Rosamund anxious. If her crime were not discovered before the morning, there was going to be trouble when it was time to start for school, and they would all be late. She had been wondering if she would have to drop a hint to put Jen on the track.

But it was not needed. Jen, with a sudden idea which proved all too correct, strode across the big hall and upstairs to her room. In a corner lay her attaché case, ready for the morning. She opened it suspiciously; then, with a yell of wrath, sprang to look in her drawers. And then she went flying downstairs to hurl her full weight on Rosamund, who sprang to get behind Maidlin.

"My beautiful overalls and cooking sleeves! All smutty and dirty! And I must have them to-morrow for school! Oh, you little brute, how I hate you!"

Rosamund was behind the settle by this time, but Jen caught her by one yellow plait and hauled her out, both protesting vehemently.

"Jen, you beast! You're hurting me!"

"I'm glad! Tell me how to hurt you worse, and I'll do it with pleasure! You absolute little horror, how could you——"

"We left you one clean set!" Maidlin cried, identifying herself with Rosamund quite unnecessarily, for she was innocent in the matter.

"But you've got to find them!" Rosamund jeered triumphantly. "And the sooner you start the better! They're somewhere in the house; I'll tell you that much!"

Joy had risen from the piano with a resigned air. "It's evident nobody's going to leave me in peace to think to-night!" said her face; and Ruth thought she read also a touch of relief that the problem must be thrust aside. Was it such a difficult question to answer, then? But surely it had no need to be? If Joy's heart were moved towards her lover, surely she would know it? If not, how could she think of marriage?

"What are you silly children scrapping about?" she demanded.

Jen poured out her tale of woe. "And I don't know where the infant lunatic has put the one clean pinny she says she's left me! It will be all crushed, too. And they were so beautifully fresh! Oh, isn't she hateful?"

"'Tisn't crushed! It's all right. But you've got to find it," Rosamund insisted.

"We'll all help, Jenny-Wren," said Joy. "The silly kid won't tell us where it is, of course. We'll organise a thorough search. But you'd better start at once; the Hall's a big place!"

She, Ruth, and Jen searched the house from attic to cellar, but Rosamund had done her work well, and it was only after long and hard search that the cooking apron was found, still carefully folded and beautifully smooth and fresh, in the bottom of a hatbox, under Maidlin's Sunday hat. Rosamund followed the seekers jeeringly from room to room; Maidlin followed, too, but was obviously uncomfortable, though she could not betray her chum.

"Mind this, Rosamunda!" and Joy turned on the culprit, while Jen lifted out her property tenderly from the box. "You'll pay for the laundrying of those other sleeves and overalls yourself. I'll take it off your pocket-money."

"Oh, no, Joy!" Jen paused in the doorway, looking round, and spoke earnestly. "You couldn't do that! She's a little pig, of course; but it was only a joke."

"Of course she'll pay for them; every penny of it," Joy said grimly. "It's past a joke when it comes to messing up your school kit."

"Very well, I will pay, then," Rosamund said sulkily, but looking rather dismayed, for she did not want to be left penniless at the start of term.

"Oh, rot!" Jen said cheerfully. "Never mind old Joy! It's not her business; they're my overalls. If she's crusty about it, you pay up, and I'll give it back to you, kid. We'll get round her that way. I'm not going to have you paying my laundry bills; not likely!"

"Jen, you're ridiculous!" Joy said indignantly. "She ought to be made to pay for fooling about with your things!"

"All right, old chap! When it's your things, you can make her pay up," Jen said soothingly. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it were yours next. Then you can be as brutal as you like. But I'm not brutal by nature. See?"

"You're downright sporting, Jen!" Rosamund burst out. "I wish I'd told you where they were! I'm sorry I did it. I never will again. It was a dirty trick!"

"It was—filthy; literally! I could weep to see my beautiful white pinnies all in that fearful state! Still, I'll forgive you, my child. I don't say I won't have my revenge, if it seems worth while and if any good scheme occurs to me; but I won't have you paying my bills out of your meagre allowance. Not if I know it!"

Rosamund laughed, conscience-stricken. "Oh, but I could! I don't do so badly," she confessed.

"You ought to let her, Jen," Joy urged.

"Shouldn't think of it!" Jen said sturdily.

"But you ought to think of her morals. It's bad for her character. I'm supposed to be bringing the child up."

"Auntie!" said Rosamund promptly.

"You might do this for me, Ros!" Jen's tone was commanding. "Come and collect all those rags you've messed up, and remove them from my room!" and she marched away, carrying the rescued overall and sleeves.

Joy and Maidlin went downstairs together, and Ruth followed the other two to offer to help fold the soiled aprons. So she heard the words with which Jen turned on Rosamund, as soon as they had entered her room.

"You idiot, why do you go cheeking Joy to-night? Can't you see she's all on edge because that man's turned up again?"

"Oh!" said Rosamund blankly. "Is *that* what's wrong with her? I thought she was rather weird! She generally likes a joke. I say, Jen! What's going to happen?" and she dropped on the end of Jen's bed and gazed at her eagerly.

"I don't know! But I know it's asking for trouble to tease her just now. It's simply silly. She wants to be left alone; any baby could see that!" And then she caught sight of Ruth. "Oh!" she said blankly, in her turn. "I'd forgotten——"

"I came to ask if I could help," Ruth said swiftly. "Please don't look so upset! You haven't told me a thing I didn't know. I couldn't tell you I knew, because it would have seemed like asking to be told more. I knew I wasn't supposed to know, so I could only pretend I didn't. But Bidy told me just that much; that there was somebody, and who he was, you know."

"Good old Biddums! She would, of course," Rosamund agreed.

Jen was putting away her clean overall carefully, her face very sober. "I'm glad you know that much," she said. "I can't tell you any more. I'm sorry he turned up just as you arrived, and I'm sure Joy is. If she's preoccupied, you'll understand and sympathise; and if she's irritable with the kids when they fool about, you mustn't think that's the real Joy. She's worried, I'm sure. And there are too many of us about. It will be better to-morrow when we all go off to school. Ros, you and Ruth had better scoot downstairs; I can fold these by myself. I only wanted a word with you! We can't let Joy think we're talking about her. Fly, both of you, if you love her! Tell her I've turned you out."

Jen, in this grave mood, was a person to be obeyed. Ruth and Rosamund retreated without a protest, and glanced at one another out in the corridor; then went tactfully down to the hall to ask Joy to play folk-songs for them to sing.

"Funny ones, or chanteys!" Rosamund could not resist pleading. "'Shanadar,' or 'The Three Sons'; or 'The Brisk Young Widow'! We don't want sloppy love things; they're so frightfully sentimental!"

Joy certainly did not want to sing love songs. She struck up "Admiral Benbow," and followed it with "Midsummer Fair."

"That was something like!" Rosamund said warmly, when the sing-song was over. "We shan't have time for this to-morrow night! Prep.—ugh! Thanks awfully, Joy! You're a dear, after all. I'm sorry I behaved like a pig. I will try to be a better child to you after this!"

"There's room for improvement!" Joy informed her.

## CHAPTER XV

### JOY IN DIFFICULTIES

That night before she fell asleep, Ruth heard a door close very gently; and wondered wistfully if Joy had been in Jen's room, sitting on her bed to brush her hair and talk about Sir Andrew. How she would have rejoiced to share their confidence! Perhaps her turn would come, she thought hopefully.

It came on Thursday, when Joy had driven off to town to take a few of the Pixie's crippled children from the East End slums for their country outing. Joy had suggested that Thursday would be an excellent day for Mrs. Shirley to call on Lady Marchwood; but the obvious retort from the whole family, that she would be using the car herself, had left her crushed and speechless. She realised she would have to go with her aunt, but put it off as long as possible; and Jen wondered if she meant to consult the Pixie while in town.

Jen, enjoying her plunge back into school life, interested in her new pursuit of the science of cookery and domestic labours, was very happy, and did not allow even the necessary practising or prep. to overburden her. She did just as much as was required and no more; rejoiced in the renewal of her friendship with Nesta, Molly Gilks, and others, who had been her companions three years ago and were taking the new domestic course with her; wore a very short skirt and a jumper, since Miss Macey refused to sanction a tunic except for gym. or country-dancing; and plunged into the school games, the hockey and lacrosse, and all the interests of the Hamlet Club, with even greater zest than when she had been a real schoolgirl.

"I know how jolly it is now," she explained. "I just took it for granted before. Now I'm appreciating it thoroughly."

On Thursday after tea, having seen that Rosamund was practising hard and Maidlin was busy with her prep., Jen caught Ruth and drew her into her room.

"The infants think I'm swotting up hygiene notes, so they won't miss us. I want somebody to talk to; aren't you dying for a talk?" she asked coaxingly. "You've been a sport, pretending not to notice things, and asking no questions; but it won't hurt Joy if we talk about it to-day, and it would be a great comfort to *me*!"

"I shall be so glad to be a comfort to you," Ruth assured her fervently. "I'm dying to understand!"

"I'm dying to talk to somebody, but I will *not* discuss it with Rosamund, and it worries Mrs. Shirley. You and I are the same age; my grown-up age! Why shouldn't we pow-wow together?"

"I'll love it! Is she going to marry him?" Ruth went straight to the point.

Jen dropped on the hearthrug before the blazing fire. Ruth switched off the light and joined her.

"My dear, she doesn't know herself," Jen said seriously. "It's awful for her! And I can't help her."

"Oh! Can't she make up her mind? Then she can't love him enough," Ruth said decidedly.

"That's what I said. But she says she's been missing him a *lot* all the autumn! It's fearfully awkward for her. For so many things she'd like to marry him so much. You see," Jen explained, "it would be just what she'd like—to settle down here, or next door, and live here all her life, and join up the Manor and the Hall and all their gardens. It's just ideal. You must

allow for Joy's love for this place; she loves it all passionately, and at the back of her mind there's a fear that some day she may have to leave it, as Joan has had to do. If Joy marries any other man in the world but Andrew Marchwood, he'll take her away to his home. Of course, she needn't marry at all; nobody wants her to—except Sir Andrew! But she has always had a fear of falling in love with some man, and feeling she must go with him to the other side of the world, or something awful like that. And if she married Sir Andrew, she'd be safe from that, and she'd keep her home for ever, and add all the Manor grounds to it. Don't you see?"

Ruth pursed her lips. "But she wouldn't do it. She can't care for him, if she can think of it like that."

"But you see how tempting it is?" Jen insisted.

"Yes, in a way. But it would be like marrying the house, not the man."

"If she didn't care for him, it would. But she does, quite a lot. He's severe and stiff with us, but she says he's quite different with her. And he's rather a famous chap; everybody knows about his travels and discoveries. He's simply crazy for Joy, and she knows it. She hates to keep saying no. She likes him better than any other man she's ever met; there's no one else in the question! It must mean a lot to a girl to know a famous man like that is just crazy about her! Joy likes him, and she hates to hurt him again."

"Well, then, if she likes him, and if she's so tempted——" Ruth began.

"Just because it's so tempting, she daren't do it. Don't you see?" Jen said explosively. "She can't trust her own feelings. She can't tell whether it's Sir Andrew or the Manor she wants to marry. If he wanted her to go to India or China, she'd know in half a sec. whether she loved him or not. But when he only wants to give her the Manor—how can she know, poor girl? It's too tempting! It's all she could want. There's no choice in it. And she daren't do it, for fear later on she'll find out it was only the Manor and to stay near the Hall she wanted, and that she's bored stiff with the man who's thrown in. I don't know anything about being in love, thanks be! But I know it's something you want to last for ever. Joy's not going to make any mistake about it. She's too honest to marry him unless she's sure she loves him. She isn't sure yet. That's how we stand!"

Ruth sat gazing into the fire. "He'll have to wait," she said at last. "He'll have to go away again. Joy's right to wait till she's sure."

"I don't see how she's ever to know!" Jen sighed.

"Sir Andrew might sell the Manor, and go and live in Scotland, or Cornwall, or the Channel Islands, and then ask her again," Ruth remarked. "Then she'd know whether she loved him or only the house. If he really wants her so badly, it might be worth his while. Would she go away with him? If she can answer that, she'll know what she feels for him."

Jen pinched her lips. "I don't know," she said at last. "I wouldn't like to see her having to decide. The Hall would pull very hard against him. It would break her heart to leave this place."

"Does he know just how she feels?"

"Not the whole of it, I think. She'll need to have it out with him, and she's dreading it. You saw how she put off going to call there. But Mrs. Shirley says they must go to-morrow, so we'll see if anything happens then."

The thing that happened was unexpected. Joy went with her aunt reluctantly, but came home in radiant high spirits. She had avoided any private talk with Sir Andrew, and had found a new interest.

"Ruth! Where's Ruth? Ruth, do you think Mary-Dorothy would do something for me?"



“Sure she would; anything you like to ask, if she can! She’ll be delighted to be asked,” Ruth said promptly.

“I want her club kiddies to give a show,” Joy said eagerly, sitting on the arm of a settle in the big hall and explaining to the four younger girls, who crowded round. “It’s to please Lady Marchwood. I’d want it to be tophole—very, *very* good! Lady Marchwood has some friends who are keen on a children’s play-hour in North London, but they’ve never done any folk-dancing. She asked if I could get some friends to give a show, to let them see what it’s like. They’d prefer to have children dancing, as they want to see if it’s suitable for kiddies; they’re afraid it would be too difficult. Mary-Dorothy’s the only person I know who has a children’s club. You’ve seen them, Jenny-Wren; would they be good enough?”

“With a few extra practices, at definite dances, I think they might be,” Jen said eagerly. “They’re very good already. Mary-Dorothy would have to choose the dances and the sets, and practise them hard in their definite places; then I think they’d be all right. It would mean a lot of work for her, though.”

“Oh, she’d do it! She’ll love to be asked,” Ruth said quickly.

“If I were in town, I’d help,” Jen said wistfully. “But as it is—well, I can write and say which dances I think they do best, anyway! I’m glad I’ve seen the kiddies. I think some one should explain they’ve only been at it for a few months, Joy. Shall you be there yourself?”

“Oh, rather! I’ll do all that. I thought I might do a jig, to make a change.”

“They’d love that!” Ruth exclaimed.

“I don’t know,” Jen said doubtfully. “Do you think you should, Joy? Wouldn’t it be better for it to be just the children?”

“Sir Andrew asked me to dance something,” Joy said shortly.

Jen raised her eyebrows, but said no more. “You’d better ask Mary-Dorothy at once. When is it to be? How long have they to get ready? As soon as you’ve asked her, I’ll send her some motherly advice.”

“In about a month. If she promises, Lady Marchwood will get the date fixed with her people. I’ll write to-night,” said Joy.

As Ruth had foreseen, Mary promised her help gladly, and was obviously delighted and proud to have been asked. Her consent was subject to Jen’s approval, however; and she begged humbly for all the help and advice any one could give her.

“Mary-Dorothy’s got no opinion of herself at all,” Jen commented. “She doesn’t trust herself one step. I wish she’d get her book out and make a big success of it. It would do her all the good in the world! But this stunt will interfere with it for a few weeks. She’ll have to leave it if she puts in extra practices with the kiddies.”

“But if they make a success of the show, won’t that help her too?” Ruth suggested. “Surely she’ll feel she’s done a big thing? Of course, I hope it *will* be a success!”

“I’m sure it will. Yes, it will help, I think. But the book’s the real thing, for Mary-Dorothy!”

## CHAPTER XVI

### RUTH'S VALENTINE

Every detail of that visit to Joy remained with Ruth throughout her life as chief among the delights of her first months in England. The Hall itself was such a fulfilment of her dreams of the Manor houses of the old country; she came to understand and sympathise fully with Joy's love for her beautiful home. Every corner seemed made for romance; it had a beauty and stately dignity which her life in the rawer Colonial atmosphere had lacked.

The Abbey, with its gray walls and ruined arches and lichen-covered roofs, satisfied her craving for the glamour of ancient times, and she was often in there, hearing its stories from the caretaker, or wandering alone and picturing the life of its white-robed monks.

In the park were wide stretches of nodding snowdrops and golden-starred aconite, and these were a new delight every day. She longed to stay all through the spring, and see the daffodils in the orchard, the violets, primroses, anemones, bluebells, and gorse all in their turn; and Joy laughingly promised to wire when each were at their best, so that she could come for a week-end and revel in them.

Outside the park were the bare beechwoods, miles of straight gray stems and ruddy fallen leaves; and she wandered wondering among them, for they were the first woods she had seen, and she could well believe that the first builder to plan a columned nave in a cathedral might have found his inspiration in some such wood.

The village interested her greatly, too, and she visited the cottages, the little house to which Joy invited East End children for a fortnight's country holiday, mothered by a kindly woman; and the home she had at last set up for overworked city girls, in a pleasant farmhouse in charge of a capable hostess-matron. There was the village hall, too, in which Joy or Jen taught country-dancing to any who cared to come, whenever they happened to be living at the Hall; and the institute where, besides a library, she was just establishing a weaving school, in the hope of reviving an old village industry which had been forgotten. Pottery-making was to follow, she explained, as soon as she could find a teacher.

Ruth, seeing it all and all Joy's varied interests, could not wonder that she shrank from the thought of leaving it; but wondered rather at the downright honesty which had prevented Joy from grasping at the chance of securing it to herself by a marriage so very suitable.

Joy was a difficult hostess at times, her thoughts obviously burdened; she forgot her guest occasionally, and apologised later. But where there was so much to interest her, Ruth never felt neglected or bored. With Jen and Rosamund, Joy was sometimes short-tempered, though a sympathetic bond of understanding seemed to exist between her and Maidlin, and she never snapped at her adopted daughter. The other two put up with her sudden outbursts of temper and her forgetfulness, and made allowances, though in private or to Ruth they expressed their opinion of love-affairs freely.

"I wish the wretched nuisance of a man would go away again!" Rosamund grumbled. "Joy bites my head off once every day, at least!"

"Has she told him to go, Jenny-Wren?" Ruth asked, when Rosamund had gone gloomily upstairs.

"My dear, she daren't!" Jen said tragically. "She doesn't know if he'd come back. You can't go on treating a man like that for ever. And he's a man who's used to having people fly

to do whatever he wants. He bosses everybody! At present, he's willing to let Joy do anything she likes with him; but he's not going to put up with it from a girl for ever!"

"But I thought she wanted him to go and leave her in peace!" Ruth said helplessly.

"Only if she's sure he'll come back! She doesn't want to marry him *yet*, but she doesn't want him to go away for ever."

"She must make up her mind! It isn't fair to him!"

"I wonder he's put up with it for so long," said Jen. "He must be fearfully keen on her; but then he is! I wish they'd settle it one way or the other!"

So did everybody. But the matter had progressed no further, and Joy was still irritable and forgetful and restless, when Ruth had to say good-bye and go back to town to help Mary with her preparations for the children's entertainment. She left the Hall with a cordial invitation to come back when the leaves were on the trees, and sooner if she could manage it, to see the wild flowers. "And us, into the bargain," Jen added. "And you've never been to a meeting of the Hamlet Club! I do think Queen Rosamund might have called one for you! Perhaps you could come on May-Day and see the coronation of the new Queen. She isn't chosen yet. Then you'd see all our old girls in their robes and crowns. The question is, will they all walk in the procession carrying their infants? And will all the infants yell at the same moment? Cicely and Joan and Miriam and Marguerite have all got families now; isn't it queer to think of?"

"We'll combine a baby-show with the crowning," said Joy. "You really must come, Ruth! It will be well worth while!"

Ruth chose a Thursday for her return to town, that being Joy's "cripple day," as she called it; and was whirled homewards in the little car very early in the morning. Joy carried her out to Plaistow for a glimpse of the beautiful club building where the Pixie taught country-dancing to East End men and girls; then filled her car with half a dozen excited small children, wrapping them up well in rugs, and sped away with them into the heart of Surrey. Ruth had called at the offices below the flat to leave her suitcase, so had no need to hurry back there, knowing Mary and Bidy would be out at work for the day. So she met them for lunch instead, and demanded a latchkey so that she could get in and have their tea and toast ready.

"How well you're both looking! February seems to suit you!" she said.

"We can certainly return the compliment! The country seems to have suited you! I'm so glad you've had such a good time," Mary said warmly.

"We're dying to hear all about it! Your letters have been ripping, but there's always heaps more to tell. How's Ros? Is Maidie going to be the new Queen? Or will it be Jen? Rosamund wants her to have a turn; she never did, you know. Oh, and you will tell us all about that Marchwood man, won't you?" Bidy cried.

"We're fearfully busy, Ruth," said Mary, her face lighting up. "We want heaps of help from you. We'll have to tell you all about it. There's shoals of work waiting for you!—preparing for Joy's show, you know."

"Me! What can I do? I'll help all I can, of course, but I was afraid I'd be no use. It's going to be a big success, isn't it, Mary-Dorothy? They call you that all the time, you know."

"I think it's going to be rather jolly," Mary's native diffidence could not go beyond that, but her eyes were eager and her cheeks flushed.

"It's going to be ripping, Ruth! You must come and see the kids practise to-morrow night. We go three times a week; they're lending us the hall for extra nights."

"But what about your book, Mary?" Ruth asked severely. "That mustn't suffer!"

“No, but it can wait. It must wait! If we’re to do this for Joy, we must do it well,” Mary said definitely. “It’s worth it, to please her. I’m proud that she’s asked us, but the children aren’t good enough yet. But they’re going to be!”

“Or Mary will know the reason why! Ruth, what have you been buying at Farnham?” Bidy burst out. “There’s a huge crate waiting for you! Is it bedroom things for yourself? Did Joy take you down there? Couldn’t you resist them?”

“Oh, have they come? Then I must go home and unpack them! I’m dying to see them!” Ruth exclaimed. “That’s what happened, Bidy. Joy took me to the factory, and you can guess the rest. You’ll spare me a corner to store them in, won’t you?”

“What colour did you get? Green, I suppose! Will you be able to get them home safely?”

“I’ll see about that later on. Hasn’t my frock come from the Pixie yet? Jen and Joy are wild to see it.”

“So are we! It came last night. I wanted to open it; I was sure it would be getting crushed! But Mary said that was only an excuse, and the Pixie knew how to pack frocks without crushing them by this time,” Bidy said indignantly. “We’re aching to see it.”

“So am I! I’m aching worse than you! I’m going right home now to unpack all my treasures!”

But it was not bedroom ware Ruth unpacked that afternoon. She bought mimosa and white narcissus on her way home, and a big cake for tea. She rummaged in Mary’s linen cupboard till she found a large white cloth to cover the whole table. Then, with hammer and chisel, she attacked the crate, and lifted out its contents.

It was the green ware which had attracted her, knowing, as she did, the plans Mary and Bidy had made for their sitting-room. But the pieces of pottery she arranged on the tea-table, after a careful loving polish to each to bring up the full sheen of its glowing colour, were not for herself. A tall jar for the mimosa, and smaller vases for the white flowers, came first; then a fat tea-pot, a dumpy pitcher for milk, a generous round basin for sugar, and a beautifully curved hot water jug; jars for jam and marmalade, a curious square dish for butter, low open bowls for fruit or jelly, a tiny toast-rack, a big muffin-dish with a lid, the neatest possible salt-cellars and egg-cups, and cups and saucers and big round plates;—the table, when she had finished spreading it, was a thing of beauty; every necessary dish or pot was there, and all were in the rich beautiful green, some mottled in darker shades, some fading to primrose yellow inside.

Ruth drew a long breath of excitement and delight.

“I’m the least little bit frightened of Mary! But, oh, you beautiful things, how I do love you!” and she went round polishing them all again with a soft duster and seeming to discover new lights and shades in each the more she rubbed its glossy surface.

“No two are quite alike!” she exulted. “I suppose hand-made things never are. Now I must see my frock!”

By a happy chance Mary and Bidy met on the stairs that night; or rather, Bidy came flying up just behind Mary and caught her at the door. “I ran all the way, so that I shouldn’t be left behind!” she panted. “You shan’t go seeing Ruth’s things without me! Don’t you think perhaps she’ll have put the frock on? It would be just like her!”

“Come in!” Ruth called, cheerily if a little nervously, and came to meet them in the silky hand-woven frock, of the vivid emerald of a spring beech leaf, patterned in the russet of autumn.

“Oh, I *do* like it!” Bidy cried.

“Ruth, it’s lovely!” Mary said warmly.

“It’s very comfy, and beautifully finished, and so easy and simple to put on!”

Then a shriek from Biddy cut her short. “Ruth! Mary! The table—look!”

Mary stood and gazed at the green and white and yellow table, her colour going and then coming again quickly. Biddy collapsed in a chair and stared at Ruth.

Ruth spoke swiftly, her eyes fixed anxiously on Mary. “I simply had to buy them, and I can’t choose for ourselves till mother comes. I shall take her to the factory, of course. These are just to go on with. Mary, you mustn’t mind. I loved buying them, and I’ve loved arranging them, and I’ll love washing and polishing them every day, and I’ve loved planning them for you; and—and it’s just because I’m so glad to be here with you, and it’s Valentine’s Day and they’re my present to you and Biddy; and—and what are a few green pots, anyway? You do like them, don’t you, Mary?”

“Like them?” Mary said dazedly. “They’re beautiful! But it isn’t right, Ruth——”

“It must be, when it makes me feel so jolly. Jen was in love with them; she told me to tell you she’s coming to tea with you as soon as she can escape from the clutches of school. There are cups and plates for four,” Ruth said eagerly. “I thought you didn’t often have more than two visitors. We can easily get more if you want to have a party. Come and look at them properly, Mary!” and she slipped her arm persuasively round her cousin and drew her towards the table. “Each piece is different. Won’t you examine them and talk about them while I get ready a little treat for tea?”

“A little *treat!*” said Mary. “A *little* treat! Ruth, I don’t know how to talk to you. I know you ought not to give us so much; but I can’t make you see it, and it’s just lovely of you to think of such a surprise. The whole room looks different. Perhaps it’s because of the beautiful thought and all the kindness behind it, even more than the beautiful things themselves. We could never thank you enough! You know there’s nothing we’d have liked half so well!”

“Then let’s settle down to enjoy them and be happy about it,” Ruth said cheerfully. “Think of the gorgeous time I had choosing them! And then showing them to Jen—and unpacking—and arranging them for you—and waiting for you to come! I’ve had a thrilling afternoon. It’s been well worth it. Now take your coat off, Mary; and then look at each pot separately!” and she hurried out to the kitchen.

“What are you doing there?” Biddy queried. “Oh, I say! Are these deep little things egg-cups? How simply dinky!”

“Look at the salt-cellars and pepper-pot!” Ruth retorted. “To say nothing of the jam jar!”

“I am looking. Mary’s stunned. Oh, I love the sugar bowl!”

“Well, what do you think of that? And that?” and Ruth brought round green dishes from the kitchen, each with a lid and tiny handle, each holding one poached egg. “All ready and waiting, you see! These are extras, for my festive tea; we’ll pretend it’s my birthday. There’s your toast; I timed it all to the minute; I knew you wouldn’t be late to-night. I’ll make the tea, and bring my own egg.”

“Oh, those are very dainty!” Mary cried, in delight. “And do they go right on the gas? Won’t they crack?”

“They’re fire-proof. But they ought to come off before they’re quite done, and finish cooking slowly under a cushion. These were sitting under cushions to wait for you. *I’m* going to start; I like things hot!”

It was indeed a festive meal. Mary pulled herself together and poured the tea from the quaint green pot, round and low and flat in shape, with great enjoyment. Biddy gloated over

the individual egg dishes, the green and yellow plates, the bulgy milk jug. Ruth revelled in their delight and in the success of her “Valentine,” and responded graciously when Bidy drank her health and called for a speech.

“No wonder you put on *the* frock!” Mary said with a laugh. “We hoped you would, but we had no idea we were coming home to such a celebration!”

“Wish we’d known! How it would have bucked me up in book-keeping this afternoon!” Bidy said fervently.

When the green “pots” had been washed and polished tenderly for the first time—Ruth wearing Mary’s big overall because she refused to take off her beautiful dress—Mary produced piles of coloured print and cotton from a cupboard and spread them on the table. “Children’s pinafores,” she explained. “For the show, Ruth. It was Jen’s idea; did she tell you? They haven’t party frocks, and some of the things they come in would never do. We don’t want them in fancy dress, but the audience wouldn’t like it if they were untidy. So Jen suggested coloured overalls, quite simple, but bright and pretty. The club leaders liked the idea, for they want to give a show for the parents and their own friends soon; so they provided the material, and everybody’s helping to make them up. These are our share; we knew we could count on you!”

“Right-o! Give me a pretty one! Do we all sit round and sew? Then I’ll tell you about Jen at school, and Joy and her Sir Andrew, while we make buttonholes!”

Before the evening was over, Ruth had realised anew how much this request for help from Joy had meant to Mary. Bidy was thrilled and excited at the thought of giving a demonstration; but Mary was much more deeply moved, because her feeling for Joy was so much deeper than Bidy’s. She was touched and proud that Joy and Jen had thought of her, and desperately anxious to justify their trust. Her “show” was going to be the event of the spring to her. For its sake she had put aside her book, and had decided not to join any classes for herself for the present, not even the Pixie’s.

“It’s not that I think I know enough. I feel every week more and more how badly I need more teaching, and how very little I really know. But I know just enough to see how much better the children will be with every extra practice I can give them; and I believe I know enough to get them really good. I’m not trying to do it all off my own bat! We had Jen’s criticisms before Christmas. I’m trying to carry out everything she said. But it will take every minute I can give to it. We’ve got to concentrate on this show till it’s safely over!”

“I do hope it will be a success!” Ruth thought anxiously. “She’ll be frightfully cut up if anything goes wrong. It *must* be a success! Of course, Joy’s desperately keen it should be good, too. She doesn’t want to be disappointed before the Marchwood crowd and all their friends. It really is important for her! But it’s a still bigger thing to Mary, because she’d be so much upset if she disappointed Joy. I just hope the children will rise to the occasion! Jen says they did when she saw them.”

She went with Mary and Bidy the following evening, to watch the practice and form her own opinion. Mary was sure of what she wanted and was very gentle with the children; but Bidy, looking very official in her tunic, and, to Ruth’s vast amusement, with her hair put up for the occasion to make her look really *old*, was stern and commanding, and shouted her orders like a drill-sergeant. At first she and Mary worked together, putting the chosen children through simple longways dances, and “Gathering Peascods” and “Sellenger’s Round.” Then Bidy retired with eight to a smaller classroom, to drill her set in “Goddesses” and “If All the World Were Paper,” and “Rufty Tufty,” supplying the music herself by means of her tin

whistle; while Mary, in the big hall, watched two sets dance “The Old Mole” and “Sweet Kate” and “Picking Up Sticks,” and tried, with Ruth’s help, to choose out the best in each. The children all worked well, and seemed to Ruth to be very good already; but Mary was not satisfied, and pulled them up continually on small points.

“They’re all putting a tremendous lot of work into it!” Ruth said to herself, as she watched, and wondered that Mary could be so good a teacher. “I hope Joy will realise, and be properly grateful! I shall have to see that she does. But Mary would hate to have me say anything. Oh, well, Joy will know there’s a lot of work behind it. She’s sure to think of that. She won’t realise how much Mary has thought about it, for she hasn’t an idea what a lot Mary thinks of her. It’s not merely a show, to Mary, but a show for *Joy*! Joy won’t quite realise that. I believe Mary dreams of it at night. It’s sure to be a success! It couldn’t help it, after the way she and Biddy have worked. Joy will be pleased and grateful, and Mary will be tremendously happy to feel she’s done something for Joy, and something that will please Jen.” And Ruth looked forward to the evening of the show without much misgiving, not nervous as Mary was, but with much anticipation, more and more sure that “the event of the season,” as Biddy called it, would be a triumphant success.

## CHAPTER XVII

### “THE EVENT OF THE SEASON”

The night of “the event of the season” came at last, early in March, after one or two postponements and changes of date to suit the various interested parties. Joan and her husband and baby were staying at the Hall, to the joy of the grandmother, the godmother, and Ros and Maidie, who claimed to be adopted aunts; so Joy could be away from home for a week or two. Released from her usual attendance upon Mrs. Shirley, she accepted an invitation from Lady Marchwood to spend a short time with her in town, and postponed her own share of the baby-worship till later.

The children’s demonstration was one of the first events of her visit to town. She came to tea with Mary, Ruth, and Biddy; admired the green pottery and exclaimed over Ruth’s green frock; approved of the children’s coloured pinafores, and talked over the plans for the evening.

“Isn’t Joy worked up about it?” was Biddy’s comment, when she had gone. “I never saw her more thrilled about anything! I suppose that man will be there, and that’s the reason. You’d think she’d been slaving for weeks to train the kids, and was going to feel she was disgraced for ever if they failed her! I believe she’s as much excited about it as Mary is.”

“If her friends are all going to be there, she naturally wants it to be very good,” Mary said nervously.

“And *their* friends! That’s the point! The Marchwood people have asked gangs of folks, and Joy doesn’t want to let the whole crowd down. She suggested the show,” Biddy pointed out. “Just suppose something did go wrong, you could always say, ‘Well, you shouldn’t have asked us, if you didn’t think we were fit!’ Joy knows she proposed it; now she wants to be sure she’ll be able to make good.”

“Don’t worry, Mary! It will be all right,” Ruth said hastily, seeing that Mary’s nervousness was increasing. “After the first two dances or so, no one will criticise anything. They’ll be enjoying it all too much. There’s only one thing I don’t like about it,” she added, “and that’s Joy dancing a jig. It hardly seems to fit in. It’s a children’s show; the whole reason of it is to show what children can do. A jig by a grown-up seems out of place. It almost looks like swank.”

“Joy doesn’t mean it so,” Mary said quickly. “And she’ll look charming doing it, Ruth. They’ll like it.”

“She dances beautifully!” Biddy urged. “And she wouldn’t ever swank, Ruth!”

“I don’t think she means it so, exactly. I do think she wants to impress the crowd, and make the show as attractive as possible, and she feels it will be a help, and a change from the children. But I think it may look like swank to people who don’t know her.”

“You’d better not tell her so!” Biddy said grimly.

“No one could ever do that, of course. If she doesn’t see it for herself, we must leave her alone. But I think that’s how it would strike me, if I didn’t know her. It’s not even as if she had trained the children. There’d be some reason in it then; the leader of a class sometimes does some ‘star turn’ on her own.”

“Perhaps Mary would like to do a jig!” Biddy said, laughing.

“Now, if Joy had proposed that Biddy should, I’d like it better,” Ruth said to herself. “Biddy dances quite well, and she’d just look like an older girl among the children; not a



grown-up outsider. And she has slaved to get the kiddies good. Yes, I think Biddy should have done that 'Bacca-Pipes' jig; she's jolly good at it. But it has never occurred to Joy. Thanks be, it hasn't occurred to Biddy, either!"

"You'll wear your white frock, Mary-Dorothy?" Ruth asked anxiously, when it was time to dress for the great event. "You're not going in that dull old gray thing. I won't allow it!"

"Oh, don't you think the gray would be better? It's quieter," Mary urged. "I don't want to look showy. The white's all right for a party, when I'm going to dance myself and everybody else is in light things; but for an occasion like this I'd rather wear the darker frock. I shall be only in the background, looking after the children. I don't matter; nobody's going to look at me."

"My dear old silly, you've trained the kiddies. You'll have to go on the platform and be introduced to Lady Marchwood and all her crowd. And there'll be votes of thanks; you'll have to make a speech," Ruth teased.

Then, seeing the acute alarm in Mary's face, she said hastily, "Oh, you won't really need to speak, I dare say! You can just bow and look pleased and grateful. That won't hurt you! But Joy will want you to speak to her crowd, and tell them how you've taught the children, of course. You must be decently dressed!"

"I thought you meant it!" Mary gave a sigh of relief. "I wouldn't have gone, if it had meant making a speech! Or I'd have fled when it came to the point. You do tease, Ruth! And I don't want to be introduced to anybody. Don't you think they could leave me alone?"

"Oh, rot!" Ruth said briskly. "You've done all the work. You can't funk the thanks! And when you see what a thumping success it is, you'll be so bursting with pride that you'll want to stand in the middle of the floor, and pat your chest and say, 'Alone I did it!'"

"Like the maypole," Biddy put in gleefully. "We could put her in the middle for 'Sellenger's Round.' Oh, Mary, your face——! You did look funny!"

"I'd simply hate it!" Mary said warmly. "And I didn't do it alone. You've done as much as I have; and Jen helped a lot, too."

"We'll come to the rescue, if Joy gets too effusive," Ruth promised. "If we think you're getting too much of it, we'll create a diversion somehow. But, of course, you must wear your white frock and look as pretty as ever you can, Mary-Dorothy."

"Don't be silly," Mary said shortly. "If that's what's wanted, I'll stay at home and do some work, and you can go in your green handwoven, and do the looking-pretty bit for me."

"I intend to!" Ruth said cheerfully. "But you're going to do your share, old thing!"

"You will sit at the back, and be 'audience,' and tell us what people say, won't you?" Biddy begged, as they entered the hall surrounded by two dozen excited small children. "Mary's going to take charge in the dressing-room and send out the right sets in their turns; you know the row kids make when they're worked up! She'll have her work cut out to keep them quiet. I'm going to look after the pianist, and yell 'Siding!' if I see somebody forgetting; some one's sure to lose her head! Mary says she couldn't bear to watch; she'd be so fearfully nervous. But we want to know how it looks from the back, and if people seem pleased; and that's where you come in!"

"I'll go right to the back, and I'll watch every single thing, including Mary's tour of the platform, and I'll tell you every word and every comment I hear," Ruth promised.

Her sense of discomfort over Joy's morris jig, forgotten in the excitement of meeting and travelling with the children, returned as she sat watching the show. After several country-dances, some by all the children and some by the separate sets, Joy came out alone from her

place beside Lady Marchwood on the platform. She wore a pretty blue dancing-frock, with ribbons and touches of bronze embroidery which matched her flaming hair; and, with big handkerchiefs in her hands, began to dance "Princess Royal." She looked beautiful and she danced beautifully, and the tumult of applause at the end seemed to justify her, and sent her back, with heightened colour and gratified eyes, to dance "Jockie to the Fair." The enjoyment of the audience was obvious, and so was Joy's delight in their appreciation. Mary and Biddy were as much delighted as any and pressed as eagerly for the encore; but Ruth's unsatisfied feeling remained.

"Somehow that morris seems out of place! It's a children's display. The morris is so different! Showy isn't quite the word; but—well, it's so strange and wonderful; won't it put the country-dances rather into the shade? It draws all the attention to Joy and away from the children, too. That hardly seems the thing. And I shouldn't think it was very good for Joy. They're all congratulating her and raving about her dancing. She'll think no end of herself after this," and she knit her brows as she looked at the delighted crowd on the platform, all thanking Joy so warmly.

"Where's Mary, I wonder?" and Ruth looked round anxiously for her cousin. "Oh, at her own old job, keeping the kiddies quiet when they aren't dancing! But she mustn't stick in that corner all evening! Joy ought to haul her out. If she doesn't, I shall. I know Mary; she'll keep out of sight till the last possible moment. I wonder if I could get hold of her now?"

But Biddy was marshalling a line of children, and handing brilliant ribbons to the "men," so Ruth waited, and watched the movements of the Ribbon Dance, and listened to the delighted comments of the crowd about her.

"Who's the pretty red-haired girl who danced alone?" asked a man behind. "Club leader, or something? I suppose she has taught the kiddies?"

"Oh, I expect so," said his wife vaguely. "She has obviously organised the show. See, there's Sir Andrew Marchwood talking to her now; he's introducing her to those people who came with the chairman."

"She's a friend of Lady Marchwood's. Look, she's going to talk to her now," said a girl. "Her dances were topping!"

"This won't do!" Ruth said uneasily to herself. "I can't butt in and tell them Joy's done none of the work, but she seems to be getting all the credit for it! Mary is an idiot, keeping out of sight like this! She ought to be on the platform. People can't even see her; half the time she's outside with the children!—Biddy!" as Biddy collected the ribbons at the end of the dance.

But Joy, from the platform, was calling to Biddy. "Let us have a few more turns of that, please! Sir Andrew says it was over too soon," and the audience broke into warmly-approving applause.

Mary came forward from her corner, flushed with the effort and with the excitement and strain of the evening. "The children are getting tired, Joy. Do you think it's wise? If they're overtired, they'll begin to forget."

"Oh, a little more won't hurt them!" Joy said easily. "Kiddies can always keep it up a little longer. Give them the ribbons again, Biddy!"

Mary shrank back, doubtful and disapproving, and the dance began again.

Ruth was staring indignantly from her place at the back. "Joy had Mary out of her corner at last, and yet she never dragged her up on to the platform! How long is she going to leave it? Mary will never go unless she's made to. Has Joy forgotten all about her?"

“Who are these other girls?” the people behind were asking. “It looked as if that older one didn’t want the dance repeated.”

“Assistants, probably. They’re obviously looking after the children. That sets the pretty girl free to talk to the guests; a very wise arrangement. So many children would be sure to get noisy and excited—Miss Shirley, did you say? Ah, thanks!” to a neighbour who had volunteered the name. “Charming girl! Makes an excellent hostess!”

Ruth, as hot and breathless as the dancing children, slipped out of her seat as the dancers trooped away; she could not have sat still for another moment without giving vent to her indignation. But she was glad she had restrained herself. Who was going to believe, on the word of a stranger, that the whole credit for the show was due to the quiet person in the background? Joy, with her vivid blue frock and flaming red hair, was so much more noticeable!

“Biddy!” It was the ten minutes’ interval, and Mary and Biddy were serving much-needed lemonade and biscuits to the children in the dressing-room. “Biddy, has Mary been introduced to Lady Marchwood yet?”

Biddy laughed. “No, she’s trying to escape. You know what she is. Do you think it’s going well, Ruth? Are people pleased?”

“Tophole! They all love it. I’ll tell Mary; it will cheer her up.”

“What’s the matter?” Biddy had caught the troubled note in Ruth’s voice. “Isn’t everything all right? I thought it was all awfully jolly!”

“It’s simply ripping!” Ruth said hastily, and hurried away.

“What can be the matter with Joy?” she was saying to herself. “Can she have forgotten Mary? *Forgotten her?* She couldn’t, surely! But Mary ought to have been introduced to Lady Marchwood before the show began! The rest don’t matter; they’re only visitors. But the whole thing has been got up to please Lady Marchwood, and—and *hang* it all!” cried Ruth in her heart. “Mary’s done all the work! She’s been slaving for weeks! What *is* the matter with Joy?”

“Is it all right, Ruth?” Mary asked nervously; she, like Biddy, had only one thought—the success of the evening. “How does it look from the back? There’s been nothing very bad so far, has there?”

“Old thing, it’s going splendidly! You needn’t worry; they’ll enjoy anything now. The kids have risen to the occasion like little sports!” Ruth said encouragingly.

Mary’s face cleared. “Do you really think so? Has it been quite all right so far? I know Gwennie got lost in ‘Bonnets,’ but it was only for a second.”

“Nobody noticed. It’s a beautiful show. The crowd simply loves it. But, I say, Mary!” Ruth hesitated, then came out with her trouble. “Why aren’t you on the platform with Joy? What is she thinking about?”

“Oh, I’m so glad I’m not!” Mary said thankfully. “She isn’t thinking about me, I’m glad to say! Don’t worry, Ruth; I’d far rather be here!”

“But those people out there think she’s the boss, and you’re only her assistant! It isn’t fair.”

“I don’t care,” Mary said, laughing. “I’d hate to be before the public any more than I am. All I want is that the children shall dance well and please everybody.”

“That’s happened already. But it’s not all *I* want! Joy’s excited, of course, and nervous, and expecting something to go wrong every second; but she ought to have introduced you, Mary! It’s rude!”

"She can't think of everything; and I'd hate to be introduced," Mary said lightly, and turned to speak to a tired small girl.

Joy appeared in the doorway. "Mary! Is Mary here? Where has she got to?"

"Oh, so she's remembered at last! Better late than never!" Ruth said aloud.

Mary looked up, flushed and nervous; to go out and be presented to the visitors might be her duty, but it would be an ordeal and no pleasure, and she was very tired. "Here, Joy! Do you think it's been all right so far?"

"Yes, jolly good. Everybody loves it. But I came to see if they could go on again almost at once? They aren't getting done up, are they? The Countess has a long ride out into the country, and she doesn't want to be late."

"The Countess! *Dear* me! Which is the Countess? I didn't know we were so highly honoured!" Bidly cried, half mocking, half in earnest.

"She's quite fascinated. Thinks it's so good for the children, and will make them so *graceful*! She's the pretty one in yellow, talking to Sir Andrew. And they want me to do another jig; do you think Bampton 'Lumps' would be best, or 'Ladies' Pleasure'?"

"Oh, 'Ladies' Pleasure'! They'll be thrilled by the kick-jumps, and yours are top-hole, Joy!" cried Bidly.

"I should do 'Lumps,'" Mary said hurriedly. "Kick-jumps are all very well in a class, when you're in a tunic, but it is a man's dance, Joy! A girl looks beautiful doing Bampton."

"Think of Madam! Yes, I believe you're right, Mary-Dorothy," and Joy regretfully put aside the thought of showing off the more sensational movements. "I'll do 'Lumps,' then; and perhaps 'None-So-Pretty,' if they want two. They won't criticise my galleys!"

"I wouldn't do one with galleys in it. They're for men," Mary ventured.

"My dear, they're *all* for men!" Joy retorted crushingly. "Let's start again! The kids have rested long enough, haven't they?"

"They're getting very tired," said Mary. "You must excuse them if anything goes wrong."

"Oh, nothing will! They're jolly good. But if we find it's getting late, you could cut out one or two dances, if they seem tired. I'll say we're ready, then."

She whirled away, followed by the admiring eyes of the children, who had watched the morris jigs spellbound, and felt honoured and uplifted by the momentary nearness of the radiant figure.

"We won't cut out anything, after all our work!" Bidly cried indignantly. "Joy can cut out her jigs, if it's too long!"

"Yes, that would be only fair," Mary said soberly. "The children would be disappointed if we left anything out."

"She *has* forgotten Mary!" Ruth said, under her breath. "Joy, how can you? There's no excuse! The interval was late enough; but Mary and Bidly both ought to have been introduced, as the teachers of the children, whether they liked it or not. She's forgotten all about them. I wouldn't have believed it of her.—She's off her head with excitement, of course; and having Sir Andrew here makes her worse. But how can she neglect Mary like this?—I wonder when she will remember? It hasn't occurred to Bidly yet, but if she thinks of it she'll feel bad. I shan't say any more to put it into her head. But—oh, why doesn't Joy think? It will be awful if—if——"

And she watched the new set of dances with heavy foreboding in her heart.

Tired though they were, the children danced well. The entertainment was well planned, with good contrast in the dances. When one set of six had danced "The Old Mole," six more

followed at once with "Upon a Summer's Day," and the effect of the quiet movements was heightened by the jollier ones that had gone before. "Goddesses" came next to "Ruffy Tufty," and "If All the World were Paper," with its singing, surprised the audience and was much enjoyed. The longways dances for a number of children were scattered among those for smaller sets, and there was no sense of monotony at any moment. How Mary and Biddy had worked and worried over the programme to gain just this result, altering it time after time till they were satisfied with the sequence of the dances!

"Joy's all over the place!" Ruth mused, as Joy, a vivid, beautiful figure, came flying to Biddy to know the meaning of a moment's delay; and then again to demand a repetition of "Gathering Peascods" to please the Countess. "Of course, it is a great occasion to her! Any one can see that. And she's very ornamental! But she is making the most of it. I do hope it won't occur to Mary and Biddy to feel hurt! They're shoved right into the background. But it's what Mary wanted, and so far Biddy hasn't seen anything wrong. She's too busy to think. Perhaps if there's a very nice vote of thanks at the end, they'll never realise they've been slighted. I should feel fearfully bad; but they're very loyal to Joy, and they aren't thinking of themselves at all."

She was standing near Biddy now; the comments of the crowd had been too irritating to her peace of mind, and she had refused to go back to her corner. "I shall say something, something strong and bad, if I do!" she had said to herself.

As the programme drew to a close, and all still went well, Mary began to enjoy herself at last, and her anxious face grew less set and strained. Biddy, with leisure to think as the burden of responsibility lightened, turned suddenly to Ruth.

"Ruth, I suppose somebody's told all those swanks on the platform that Mary's done all the work of this show?"

"Oh, of course," Ruth said hastily. "Joy's sure to have explained. She'll say something to the rest of the crowd presently."

"I jolly well hope she will! For it looks awfully much as if it were Joy's show!" Biddy had awakened to the true position at last, and her jealousy for Mary's credit, once aroused, grew with lightning speed. "There's a jolly lot of Joy about it, it seems to me!"

"You go and tell them, if you think they don't know," Ruth said rashly, and would have given much to be able to recall the words the next moment.

"I'd love to. But Mary would never forgive me. I do hope people understand," Biddy said gloomily. "It's all very well for Mary to want to hide, and not be seen, and all that, but it seems to me she ought to have been on the platform some of the time, anyway!"

Ruth could say nothing to comfort her. She could only hope that the inevitable vote of thanks would put everything right in a few minutes.

Then the children danced "Sellenger's Round," and the show was over, and all had gone very well. Mary's tension relaxed, and she sat down limply, with a sigh of relief, while the applause broke out again and again.

The chairman rose to make a few remarks. He thanked Miss Shirley, "who has provided this excellent entertainment for us"; he congratulated her on the success of the evening and spoke of the pleasure it had given him personally; he said a few words of appreciation of her own beautiful dancing; he hoped the children of the neighbourhood would soon be dancing as prettily as those they had just been watching.

Joy, smiling graciously, declined in laughing embarrassment to make a speech. Teased by those around her on the platform to "say just a few words," she rose, flushed and prettier than

ever, and acknowledged the thanks gracefully. Then she sat down, to be complimented again, this time on her “charming little speech.”

From close beside the platform, a hurt girlish voice rang out, clearly heard while the pianist hunted wildly for the music of the National Anthem. “Aren’t you going to say anything about Mary? She’s done *all* the work!”

“Biddy! Oh, how could you?” Mary groaned, and, white and shaking, caught Biddy’s arm and dragged her down into her seat.

Ruth caught her breath; she had grown cold with horror as Joy sat down. “Good for Biddy! But oh, how awful of her! Joy will never forgive her!”

Joy, crimson, was on her feet again. She was not in the least shy; her diffidence in speaking had been merely polite. “I ought, of course, to have explained that the children have been trained in their dances by Miss Devine. I thought that was understood. We are all much obliged to Miss Devine for the trouble she has taken.”

It was little enough, but so far as outsiders were concerned it covered up the awkward moment. There was more applause, and Mary, shrinking and distressed, anxious only to disappear with Biddy out of Joy’s sight, stood up in her place and bowed, then hastily turned to beg the pianist to play the chord. The audience rose also, and the incident was over.

Over? Mary turned to look for Ruth, her lips quivering in the inevitable reaction; Ruth, knowing her, had foreseen it and was hurrying to her side. Biddy had fled to the dressing-room, white and angry.

As Ruth reached Mary, Joy passed them in the crowd, and paused. If Biddy was angry, Joy was furious; one glance at her face told that. She had, it seemed to her, been made to look ridiculous before her friends. She knew she had been wrong; if it had been put to her quietly she would have been the first to admit it and to say how sorry she was. But Biddy had made a fatal mistake, and had put herself, and of course Mary, hopelessly outside the pale.

“You’d better keep your sister at home till she learns how to behave in public, Mary Devine!” Joy flung at Mary and Ruth in a low tone, and passed on to Lady Marchwood’s car.

Mary, quivering under the blow, yet drew herself up suddenly. “Biddy wasn’t *all* to blame. I think she had some excuse,” she said, to Joy’s relentless back, with a brave attempt at dignity.

But Joy did not turn back.

“I’ll sit down for a minute, Ruth,” Mary said breathlessly. “Will you—will you ask Biddy to see to the children?”

“You’re overtired, old thing,” Ruth was watching her anxiously. “Would you like some water? You sit still, and I’ll fetch your coat and hat.”

“Where is the little girl who spoke up so pluckily?” a voice asked behind Ruth. “I think I have met her before.”

She turned quickly, and Mary looked up with startled eyes, to face Sir Andrew Marchwood.

“I want to thank her,” he said, with blunt ignoring of the delicacy of the position. “We had had no opportunity to thank this lady for all her work. It was, of course, the fault of the chairman, who failed miserably in his duty. I apologise for his carelessness, and wish to add my thanks to Miss Shirley’s. I should like to thank the little girl also for speaking up so bravely. It was not an easy thing for a child to do.”

Mary’s eyes met his. “It wasn’t a very polite thing to do,” she said. “I’m very sorry about it.” She had pulled herself together in a moment, with a plucky effort which did not escape

him. His keen eyes, trained to notice every smallest detail, had seen she was white and shaking, and he understood, more fully than she realised.

“You must forgive her. She was thinking of you,” he said. “She is your sister? It was only natural, if a little unusual. I hope you will not scold her. Tell her I wished you to thank her for me. May I congratulate you again on the success of the evening and the splendid results of all your work? I know Miss Shirley would wish me to do so.”

Then he passed out of the hall, and Mary and Ruth looked at one another. “He understands. Oh, I hope he isn’t disappointed in Joy!” Mary whispered. “For he ought to think she’s perfect. And—and she did forget, Ruth, though he tried to cover it up. It wasn’t kind!”

“Old dear, I’ve been dying to get hold of her and shake her all evening!” Ruth said vigorously. “But you mustn’t be too cut up, Mary. It’s only that she was excited because he was here. She’d have remembered to-morrow, and come round to thank you.”

“Yes—oh, yes! I didn’t care. But she’ll never forgive us now,” Mary said hopelessly. “If only Biddy—oh, if *only* Biddy had been content to wait!”

“Yes, but Biddy had been boiling for some time for your sake; and at last she boiled over. Mary, old thing, can’t you forget it all till we get home? We *must* see to those children!”

Mary rose hastily. “Yes, we must. I’m an idiot. The ’bus will be waiting. I’ll go and help Biddy.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MARY'S LETTER

Biddy met Mary nervously and shrank from her look. She was hastily getting the children into their coats and shoes. Mary went to help without a word, and for the moment Biddy felt relieved.

But when they had driven with the children to their usual hall and dismissed them to their homes, and Ruth, heeding no remonstrance, had hailed a taxi, and they were speeding homewards together, and still Mary said nothing, lying back in her corner worn out and silent, Biddy grew uneasy. She knew she had done wrong, and she wanted to justify herself. She felt defiant, and wanted to say what she thought of Joy.

“Mary!” she began.

“Leave her alone, Biddy. Don’t be silly!” Ruth said sharply. “Can’t you see she’s too tired to talk?”

Biddy looked mutinous, then frightened, as she glanced anxiously at Mary. But Mary was gazing out at the lighted streets and did not meet her eyes. Biddy lapsed into gloomy silence till they reached home.

“You sit by the fire, Mary-Dorothy,” Ruth commanded. “It will be hot in two minutes. Biddy and I will get the supper ready.”

She caught Biddy alone in the kitchen. “Don’t worry her to-night. She can’t judge, and neither can you. It will all look different in the morning.”

Biddy gave her a scared, defiant look. “Is she wild with me? Joy was hateful, Ruth!”

“She didn’t mean to be. You might know her well enough for that. Now you did mean it, Biddy! So you were really worse than Joy!”

“Of course I meant it!” Biddy began stormily. “It was abominable!”

“But you made it ever so much worse. Mary feels you’ve made it quite impossible to smooth things over, as she would have liked to do.”

“Mary would put up with anything! I’m glad I told Joy what I thought! It was good for her!”

“But it was very foolish of you. And you’ll only make things worse if you try to talk to Mary to-night. Get her some supper and get her to bed, and leave it all till to-morrow.”

Mary was so obviously determined not to talk about Joy that there was nothing to do but postpone or ignore the whole matter. She questioned Ruth during supper on many points, as to how different dances had looked from the back of the hall, how the colours of the pinafores had blended, if the timing had seemed good, and so on; and Ruth talked hard, and even drew Biddy on to give her opinions.

As they rose from the table, Mary said wearily, “We’ll get to bed as soon as we’ve washed up. Oh, yes, I’m going to help. If you’ll fill the bottles, Biddy, we’ll all go to bed in a few minutes. There’s just one little thing I have to do.”

She turned away quickly, her lips suddenly unsteady. Biddy gave her a scared look, and began to clear the table nervously.

The feeling in the flat was so tense, they were all three so silent, and yet so expectant of something about to happen, that Biddy was glad when she could escape to bed.



"I'll come in ten minutes," Mary said briefly, speaking for the first time since supper. "I'm not quite ready. Won't you go, too, Ruth?"

"What is it you're going to do, old thing?" Ruth had guessed at the answer, however.

Mary faced her steadily. "Write a note to Joy, apologising for Biddy's rudeness. She must get it in the morning."

Ruth pushed her gently into a chair beside the table. "Must you, Mary? Can't you leave it? Joy was in the wrong?"

"Yes, but Biddy has put us more in the wrong," Mary said, her tone weary and unhappy, but resolute. "She was rude. I can't leave it so. I would like her to say she is sorry, but I know she would never do it. So I must."

"It wouldn't be true, if she did say it. Is it wise, Mary? Won't it make Joy overlook the fact that she was the first to be *very* rude, and *very* unkind, and *very* neglectful of you?"

Mary's face quivered. "She didn't mean it. She isn't unkind really, Ruth. You know she's kind. In the excitement she had no time to think, that was all. She'd have remembered afterwards, and been sorry. Don't you see"—her voice broke—"don't you see how awful I feel? Biddy asked her to thank me! She'll think I was expecting it; that I was proud and offended—with *her!*"

"You had every right to be," Ruth urged.

"I wasn't. I hadn't thought of it. I did it all to please and help her, not because I wanted to be thanked. For Biddy to say *that!*—I couldn't sleep unless I had apologised."

"Write it, then, and I'll run down to the post with it. Oh, I won't let you go another step to-night!"

"You're a dear, Ruth!" and Mary fetched her pen, and wrote swiftly for a few moments.

"That's all," she said briefly, as she folded it. "I'm not going to discuss the matter unless she wishes it. I've merely said I realise that Biddy was unpardonably rude, and I wish to apologise on her behalf, and that she spoke without thinking and when she was excited and overtired. We can say more later on, if necessary. Ruth, I had to write! I don't want to quarrel with them all," and she looked at her cousin anxiously for sympathy. "Biddy *was* rude! I can't have Joy telling Jen, and stopping there. At least we can say we're sorry."

"Yes, I see," Ruth said gently. "It keeps the door open between you, anyway; or if it's closed, it will have to be closed by Joy. Biddy did her best to close it, but you're holding it open. It all depends now on how Joy takes your letter. You've put it up to her. That's fair, after all; she treated you very badly. You're giving her a chance to put that right. Yes, you're right, Mary. I'll post your letter."

"Leave the door open, so that Biddy won't hear," said Mary, and was sitting by the fire when Ruth came back.

"Won't you tell Biddy you've written, Mary?"

"I may, if it seems best. But not to-night. To-night it would only make her very angry, and she'd want to argue. And, Ruth, I'd rather not tell her either what Joy said about her or Sir Andrew's message; not at present."

"I told her what he said," Ruth said quickly. "I'm sorry. Do you mind very much? She said he was an old dear, and she hoped he'd marry some one much nicer than Joy!"

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. He told us to give her the message. She met him a year ago, at the Hall. But don't tell her about Joy; she didn't hear, and it would only make her very angry."

"She's quite angry enough," said Ruth sombrely. And then, doubtfully, hesitating how far she dare go—"Mary, it was hard lines! It spoiled your evening. And it was such a splendid

show. The children danced beautifully, and everything went so well. You ought to be feeling so happy and relieved. Jen will be delighted when she hears how good it all was. I'm so very sorry this has happened!"

Mary looked at her, and tried to speak. Then her face dropped into her hands, and she broke down, worn out with all the strain and excitement and disappointment.

Ruth's arms closed round her. "Dear, do cry! You'll feel better. You've been looking so dead and frozen! That's right, Mary! That's better!"

She looked up sharply as the bedroom door opened, and Biddy's frightened face looked out. Then, with a whirl of kimono and nightdress and falling brown hair, Biddy was on her knees beside her sister.

"Mary, I'm sorry! If you mind so much, I'll say I'm sorry! But don't hate me, Mary! I can't bear that. It was because I felt so bad about you, Mary! Oh, Mary, old thing, don't cry like that!"

"I'm going to bed. Don't forget to put out the fire, you two!" said Ruth, and retired, but heard the murmur of their voices and saw the light below her door for half an hour, and knew the matter was being talked out thoroughly.

"I shan't refer to it again!" she said to herself. "We'll consider the subject closed, until Joy answers Mary's letter. Then we'll know where we are!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### A LETTER FROM JOY

Joy's reply came promptly; too soon, in fact. The letter was waiting when Mary came in from the office next day; Ruth had been gazing at it anxiously for half an hour. It was so very prompt that she felt nervous as to its contents, for it had obviously been written immediately on receiving Mary's note. It was a relief to hear at once, of course; but surely it would have been reassuring to know Joy had taken a little while, even half a day, to consider her answer. At the moment, Ruth felt distrustful of Joy's impulses.

She saw Mary grow a shade whiter as she took up the letter; and wondered again at the depth of her feeling for Joy, which could make her care so very much.

Mary went into her own room with the letter.

"You won't mention this to Biddy when she comes in, Ruth?" she begged, pausing at the door.

"Right-o! But come quickly and have your tea," Ruth spoke lightly, because she had read the depth of anxiety in Mary's eyes, and knew that she could hardly bear to open the letter, for fear its tone must separate her from Joy and Jen for ever.

Mary, sitting on her bed, her hat thrown aside, read the letter, her hand shaking as the meaning reached her.

"DEAR MARY,—I can quite understand that you expected to be thanked last night, and I am sorry I forgot. But Biddy was abominably rude, and until she learns how to control herself you had better keep her at home. If excitement and tiredness can make her behave so badly, she ought not to be allowed out without a nurse and should be sent to bed at seven.

"I am,

"Yours,

"JOY SHIRLEY."

Mary sat staring at the letter. Then she looked up, her eyes dazed. It was as if Joy had struck her. Something she had cherished for a year died at that moment.

She might still love Joy, though just now it did not seem possible. She would make excuses for her as soon as she could think clearly. But the idealism and glamour were gone. The image had fallen from its pedestal. She could look up to Joy as her heroine no longer.

In spite of Ruth's warning, it was a blow that nearly broke her heart. Hardly knowing what she did, she rose and put the letter in a drawer; then remembered that it was Biddy's late night, so there was no fear of immediate discovery. Mechanically she hung up her coat, and changed her shoes, and tidied her hair. She could not think; she only knew that the world felt very cold.

Then she realised dimly that she did not know what had been in the letter. The first numbness was passing off. She took it out and re-read it, steadying herself against the mantelpiece because her knees were shaking.

It was not the words that had hurt so. There was nothing in them to have stunned her so completely, no hint that Joy did not want to see her again, that their friendship was over. It was the cold angry tone of the letter, the feeling behind it. Mary's sensitive nature quivered again

as she read. She could not realise as yet that Joy, hot-tempered and impulsive and utterly unimaginative, would never understand how such a letter could hurt; that the worst harm of the letter lay in the feelings it must rouse in her; that Joy's anger was less serious than her own reaction to it.

But one sentence did wound her acutely, and for a long time; and not, she felt, without reason. "You expected to be thanked"!

How could Joy have misunderstood so completely? How *could* she? No appreciation at all of the joy it had been to prepare that show, the delight in feeling she was helping! "Expected to be thanked"!  
As if she had worked for thanks!

"She doesn't know what I've felt. She never has known. Or she could never have said that to me!" Mary said unsteadily, as she put the letter away again. And she knew now what it was she had lost; Joy was no longer perfect in her eyes. She did not understand, could not understand. She might still be kind, gracious, friendly, a benefactress trying to help all who needed her; but an understanding friend who could enter into another's feelings—"She may be to Jen or Joan," Mary thought brokenly. "I don't know anything about that. But she doesn't care enough about me to understand me. She doesn't begin to know how I felt about last night. She takes the easy obvious explanation, and never troubles to ask if it's like me. If she'd stopped to think, or if she'd really known me, she could never have said that to me. She's killed something I'd given her."

She felt strangely cold and lonely without that something, almost as if the letter had brought news of the death of a close friend. Looking back afterwards and thinking it over, she knew that this sense of loss had been as real as if Joy had indeed died; and it had lasted for several days. She was learning rapidly to analyse feeling, her own or that of her story-girls; and she must probe and ask herself, as soon as she could bear to do so, "Why did I feel like that?" The answer, "Because I cared so much more for Joy than she knew," brought its own comfort; for Mary was logical, and was forced to admit, "Then it's more my own fault than hers. She didn't mean it. I've no right to blame her." In that direction of her thoughts lay healing to the wound. But it took a few days before she could think of it clearly. At first she was cold and numb and hopeless, and the words haunted her, "You expected to be thanked."

Ruth found her still standing on the hearthrug, her head resting on her arm on the mantelpiece.

"Mary! What's the matter? What did Joy say?" Her voice was sharp with anxiety.

Mary pulled herself together bravely, as she had done the night before. "Not very much. She's a bit annoyed with Bidy still, of course. Have you made the tea? How good of you! I'll come at once."

Ruth glanced at her doubtfully, but postponed further questions for the moment. She watched Mary during tea, and listened to her disconnected remarks on the weather, the office, her lunch, the walk home.

"She's awfully cut up!" she said to herself. "I shall have to make her tell me. She mustn't keep it bottled up. And I don't believe she means Bidy to know."

"Won't you tell me about Joy's letter, Mary?" she asked at last.

Mary rose, and went to sit by the fire, turning away from her. "I'm an idiot. I'll tell you in a day or two, Ruth. I can't think about it yet. I must wait."

"That's no good, old thing," Ruth said gently. "You'll only be miserable while you're thinking of it all alone. It always helps to talk things over. You may keep it from Bidy, but you know you can't from me, since I saw the letter. Won't you feel better if I understand?"

Mary's lips quivered. "I don't want to talk about it. But you may read the letter, if you like; and you may talk some sense to me. I don't mind listening. But I haven't anything to say about it yet."

Ruth fetched the letter and read it, her face troubled. Then she dropped on the rug at Mary's feet, and spoke quickly, while they both stared into the fire. "Mary, old thing, she doesn't mean half as much as you think. She wrote in a hurry, still in a temper. It's possible there may be a kinder letter in a day or two. But I don't think so, for I don't believe she'll dream she's hurt you. She won't know how much you'd care if she did, either. You must remember she's Joy, and she doesn't dream you care about her so much."

"She doesn't understand!" Mary had no more to say. "I thought she did."

"How could she, old girl? Have you ever told her you love and worship her, and all that? Does she know she's been a heroine to you? How could she? Mary dear, she's only an ordinary girl, with a bit of a temper, and she's used to being considered first always. She simply doesn't know how to see any one else's point of view. How could she? Mary, she doesn't mean any harm by this letter; she's only a bit irritated with Biddy."

"And she thinks I did it to be thanked!" the cry came from Mary's hurt soul.

"Oh, that's only that she doesn't understand!"

"I know," Mary said drearily. "That's all. But it's a good deal, Ruth."

Ruth looked up at her anxiously. "What are you going to do now?"

"Do? What is there to do? I shan't tell Biddy; it wouldn't do any good. There isn't anything to do."

"You won't write again? But of course not; you couldn't."

"There's nothing to say. I'm not going to write and say—yes, I would like to say that!" She rose quickly and found a postcard, and scribbled a few lines on it. "I'd like to send that. I'd feel better. I hate to sit down under her letter. Will it do any harm?"

Ruth read the words thoughtfully.

"DEAR JOY,—You have misunderstood me completely. I wouldn't have believed you could. I did not try to help you in order to be thanked. I am sorry you should have thought so.

"Yours sincerely,

"MARY DEVINE."

"I should send it," Ruth said quietly. "You'll feel better. It won't do Joy any harm. I'll post it for you."

"Now that's done with!" she said, when she returned. "We'll try not to go on thinking about it, Mary. What are you going to do now? You ought to get on with your book. You've left it for weeks. It ought to be finished."

"Perhaps I will. But not to-night; I'm very tired," Mary said wearily. "It's after last night, of course; it was a very exciting evening."

"It was!" Ruth said grimly.

"I've been feeling limp all day. But I have had one idea, and I mean to act on it," and Mary made a brave attempt to put Joy out of her mind. "We can't go to classes now this term. There are only three weeks before Easter. But it's time we had some dancing for ourselves; we're getting out of practice. I'm going to write and ask the Pixie if she'd have room for all three of us in one of her classes at Plaistow, if they're not too far advanced. She's kind; she'll take us

in, if she can; and I'm not afraid of her since I saw her at that children's party. You couldn't be afraid of her, anyway."

"Topping!" Ruth said warmly. "But tell her I'm an absolute beginner. That's a gorgeous idea, Mary!"

The Pixie's reply came promptly. "Come to my party next Wednesday at seven o'clock, in the big gym! I'll find you partners and tell you all about classes then. How nice to see you again!"

For the next few days Mary looked anxiously for some answer from Joy; and Ruth, watching her, saw her disappointment each day when none came. Mary did not speak of the matter again, and hid her sore feeling bravely; but she had hoped for just a line from Joy, to say she understood now and was sorry, and the fact that it did not come puzzled and hurt her.

Ruth was glad when the night of the Pixie's party came. At least it would give Mary something new to think about!

"We don't know very much yet," the Pixie informed them gaily, when they arrived after what felt like a long and adventurous 'bus journey to Dockland. "It's a club members' party; just some jolly London girls and boys. We're all beginners; but we do know how to enjoy ourselves! The men wear these, over their shirts," and she showed coloured baldricks of red and green braid, to cross on the chest and back, and adorned with brilliant rosettes. "They like them; they feel dressed up. We don't have evening dress in Plaistow! The girls wear light frocks, if they have them; and most of them have. But they all wear these over their frocks, and then it doesn't really matter what's underneath," and she held up a tabard of bright blue, with a hole for the head, and bands of vivid braid to buckle under the arms, and rosettes at the waist-line to match those on the baldricks.

"How pretty! And what a good idea!" Ruth said warmly. "What an easy way to dress them up!"

"Oh, we always used those in France, when we hauled in W.A.A.C.s or Y.M.C.A. ladies for partners. We had to dress them somehow. I've sat up often making rosettes and tabards half the night, before a show. Come along and find your partners! We shall do very easy dances to-night. I shall teach, you know; we still have to learn dances at our parties. There are always some who don't know them.—Oh, you aren't going to dance together!" as, in the big gym., Mary took Ruth's hand, partly to help her and partly for protection, because she felt shy. "There's no fun in that. I shall put you where you'll be most use to me. We're going to start with 'Mary and Dorothy,' " with a twinkle up at Mary. "You don't know it, do you?" to Ruth. "Then I'll give you to some one who does. Here, Biddy, you look after Jenner for me; he doesn't know anything at all about it; do you, Bob?" to a grinning, shy-faced lad. "You tell him what to do."

Throughout the evening the three visitors found themselves "given to" one or another, or "put somewhere," as seemed best to the little mistress of ceremonies. There was no chance of dancing in a set together; she simply would not hear of it; and they went meekly, amused at their own docility, to any corner she wished. They hardly spoke to one another for the whole two hours, so busy did she keep them helping to entertain her company; sending Biddy to talk to shy boys, Ruth to separate giggly girls by asking one of them to take care of her in "Rufty Tufty," Mary to persuade a girl even more diffident than herself to join in "Bonnet So Blue."

From a little platform up near the roof, which held only a piano and a chair, and, perhaps, a Pixie, at one time, their friend directed operations, shouting commands in a voice which really made Ruth jump when she heard it first; it was so very emphatic and peremptory for so

tiny a person. Bidy held her breath more than once, lest, in her agitation over a muddle happening below, the Pixie should leap to the ground and break her neck; but she always restrained herself just in time, and came scrambling down her ladder, to be caught half-way and lifted off by one of the men.

Mary thought she had forgotten her troubles in the interest of watching the teaching, the tactful management of the crowd, the insistent breaking-up of little cliques whenever they began to form, and the scattering of bosom friends to the corners of the room; and most of all the happy, boisterous girls and lads, whose enjoyment was so infectious, whose devotion to their leader was so obvious.

But the little person saw many things, even while she taught; and in an interval, while Bidy was entertaining her latest partner with her frank opinions of book-keeping and shorthand, and Mary was drawing out a shy teacher to tell of her children in school, the Pixie turned swiftly to Ruth. "What's the matter with her? With Mary? She isn't happy. Is it Jen she's wanting? Isn't she writing? Or what's wrong?"

Ruth gasped a little. Then she pulled herself together. "How did you manage to guess? She isn't showing it to-night. She's trying not to."

"I know. I can see that. What's happened to her?"

"It isn't Jen. And she is writing again, and she says the book's all right," Ruth was temporising, though she knew she would have to answer; the Pixie was too good a friend to be content to remain unsatisfied.

"Well? Was she disappointed over that show? I saw Joy at the shop, and she said the children danced beautifully. What's the matter with Mary?"

"Could I have lunch with you? I'd like to tell you the story," Ruth pleaded. "But Mary mustn't know."

"Right! Come on Friday, will you? I'll book that, then," and the Pixie dashed for her wallet, whipped out a diary, and made a hasty note. "That's fixed up! Are you all coming to the party to-morrow night—the official party?"

"Mary says she doesn't think she'll go. Bidy and I want to."

"Oh, make her come! Tell her I said she was to come! All right! You'll tell me all about it on Friday. Now what shall we have? We must go on dancing! What would you like? Do you like 'Jenny Pluck Pears'? Don't know it? Oh, we'll teach you, then. We love it," and she called for rings of six, and set the room to dancing again.

## CHAPTER XX

# THE QUEER WAYS OF JOY

On the following evening, in the big hall in the West End, Mary and Biddy were standing together, ready to dance "Flowers of Edinburgh" and waiting for the music to begin, when Biddy slipped out of her place in the line and thrust Ruth in instead. They had agreed to take turns, as there were three of them, and Ruth had begged to be the audience for the first dance.

"I don't want to dance this! I can't. She'll tell you what to do!" Biddy's whisper came strained and hurried, and before Ruth could protest she had fled to the farthest corner of the room.

"What's the matter with her?" Ruth began amazedly; then at the same moment she and Mary saw, and the music began.

They could not escape, for they were in the middle of the line and everybody had numbered. Their eyes met, in wild dismay, and then they had to do their "figure eight" and swing and change.

"She won't take any notice of us," Ruth said swiftly, as she skipped the turning change, "and we won't go and speak to her, naturally! Cheer up, Mary! It's a big hall; we can easily lose ourselves in the crowd. She may never see us. Don't let Joy Shirley spoil your party!"

"She's spoiled Biddy's," said Mary, taking refuge in the obvious, for the sight of Joy in the crowded doorway, piloting Lady Marchwood towards the platform, had quite upset her mental balance.

It was easy enough during the longways dance to pretend to be ignorant of Joy's presence; and easy enough, when the music stopped, to join Biddy in her far-away corner. Joy, in a pretty white dress, was greeting friends on every side, and introducing some of them to her guests; she did not often appear at parties, so was surrounded by would-be partners at once. In "Hey, Boys," Mary and Biddy were safe, as a couple they had met at Chelsea begged them to make up a set; one of the girls asked Biddy to be her partner for "Gathering Peascods," so Mary and Ruth danced together.

But then came "Pop Goes the Weasel"; and, as Jen Robins had once said, "You never know *whom* or *what* you may meet in a longways dance!" Mary and Ruth were working up the line, enjoying the running rings, when led down the middle by her "man," Avice Everett, came Joy. She was talking to Avice, laughing as she came; and she did not notice them; but they knew that in a few more turns she must make the ring with them and "pop" under Ruth's raised arm.

It was a difficult moment for Ruth, a horrible one for Mary. But again there was no escape; they could not leave the line now. There was nothing for it but to await Joy, "pop" her out of the ring, and let her man "pop" Mary, and then she would disappear down the line and they would go on up to the top, and they need not meet again. It had been very bad luck that had brought Joy into their line, when there were three others for her to choose from. Perhaps in the excitement of the dance she would hardly notice them; there would certainly be no time for conversation!

But it had been no chance that had brought Joy to that line. She had seen them long ago, but had been unable to escape from her many friends to seek them. She had led Avice to that particular line, so that she must meet Mary and Ruth in time.



Ruth held out her hand to “first woman,” her face grave. Mary, left standing outside the ring, looked strained and set.

Joy, catching Ruth’s hand and Avice’s, ran round and “popped” home to her place. Then, as Avice and Ruth took Mary into the ring instead, she cried, “I’ve been wanting to speak to you two, but there are such stacks of people I know here. I hope you weren’t too tired after that *shauri* last week? Have you quite got over it? It was fun, wasn’t it? I want Mary to come and tell Lady Marchwood more about the children’s club. Will you, while we’re doing the Running Set?” she called over her shoulder, as Avice skipped her out of the line. “I know you won’t be dancing that. Do go and entertain her for me, there’s a dear!”

Mary’s eyes met Ruth’s, dazed bewilderment their only expression. Ruth, gasping for breath, laughed and sprang into her new ring. “Afterwards! I can’t talk and dance!” she cried to Mary, as they swung. “I think I understand, but I may be wrong. I’ll tell you when this is over.”

“Look here, old thing!” she whispered hastily, in a corner of the dressing-room, to which they had fled. “I know you won’t believe it, but Joy hasn’t the remotest idea she hurt your feelings. She simply doesn’t understand. To her it’s all over and done with. You can hate her for it, because it’s so unfeeling; or love her for it, because it’s so obvious she never meant to be unkind. That’s for you to decide. To her, it was just a few words said when she was in a temper, and tired, and excited; and she’s forgotten all about it.”

“Forgotten!” Mary whispered dazedly.

“It’s a tragedy to you, of course. But then you’re Mary, and she’s Joy. You feel things and she doesn’t. She’d be thunderstruck if I went and told her how you’ve been feeling for a week.”

“Ruth! You couldn’t! Promise!” Mary cried, her voice sharp with horror. “If she doesn’t feel it she mustn’t ever know. Promise, Ruth!”

“Oh, I won’t tell her! I’d like to, but I won’t. It’s just possible that she has a glimmer of an idea and is trying to bluff it out and show you there’s nothing to take offence about. No! That’s not so,” Ruth decided quickly. “She’s genuine; she wasn’t pretending anything. She doesn’t *know* there was anything to take offence about! It seems impossible to us, but I believe it’s so. Let’s go back and see what happens, Mary! Don’t run after Joy; but if she comes to us again, just see how she speaks, and see if you don’t think I’m right. Isn’t this the thing you’re dancing with the Pixie?—the ‘Newcastle’ thing? Come on, then! She’ll be looking for you.”

“How I ever found my place in those lines I shall never know,” Mary whispered, as she sat with Ruth to watch the Running Set later in the evening. “I know now that I really *must* know ‘Newcastle’! Or else the person I was arming with put me there; I suppose that was it. I know I never thought about my place or anything. And I had no good of the Pixie; I don’t know what she thought of me!”

“She wouldn’t worry,” Ruth said comfortingly. “Look how she’s enjoying herself! I don’t believe she thinks of anything when she’s dancing.”

“Oh, yes, she does!” Mary said. “She was telling me all the time—when we were together, which wasn’t long in ‘Newcastle’!—about a friend she’d just met, whom she hadn’t seen for years. She was so full of it that perhaps she wouldn’t notice how queer I was.”

“Mary, it’s all right about Joy!” Biddy came up eagerly, her face radiant. “I’ve been talking to her. I was mad with her at first, of course; but I suppose I was rude, and I’ve been worrying for fear she’d never speak to us again, and it would be so awful for you, when it was all my fault. But she’s as jolly as ever, so that’s all right!”

“Yes, that’s all right!” Mary said quietly, and turned away to watch the Pixie in the dance.

“That nice Mr. Jevons sent me a note last week, asking so prettily if I’d be willing to run a set with him!” the Pixie said happily, as she came up to watch “Sellenger’s Round” with them. “Such a nice letter! And he’s such a dear. Here’s Joy Shirley wanting one of you!”

“I’m not going to dance this,” and Joy came up to join them, glass of lemonade in hand. “I’m dead after that last go! I say, have any of you heard from Jenny-Wren lately? Since Tuesday? Then you haven’t heard the news. She’s simply thrilled about it. The Hamlet Club met on Tuesday, and they absolutely insist on having Jen for the next Queen. They say she must wait with us till after May-Day, and then if she has to go away they’ll choose another Queen. But they’re determined to crown Jenny-Wren, after all. She left school just too soon, you know; she was Joan’s Maid, and we thought she’d be the next Queen, but she left at Christmas, so she missed her Coronation. They love her at school, of course; so they’ve decided to crown her now. If you can come for the Coronation, we’ll put you all up somehow; if not at the Hall, then in the Abbey. The Hall may be full to overflowing with Joan and her crowd; you wouldn’t believe the amount of room Janetta takes up! But you’d love to stop in the Abbey, and I know Jen will want you to be there.”

Mary flushed, but was spared the need to answer by a query from Biddy, who had been talking to a friend and had not heard the invitation. “Where’s Madam, Joy? She never comes to anything now! Ruth hasn’t seen her dance yet. It’s rotten of her to stop away like this!”

“She’s all right. I saw her this afternoon. I had to take her a parcel from Jen,” Joy regarded Biddy seriously. “She said she didn’t think she’d come to the party. She was feeling a bit tired.”

“And she isn’t teaching any classes this term!” Biddy grumbled. “I’d ask if Ruth might go to watch, if Madam was teaching anywhere, but they say she’s not. I did hope she’d be here to-night!”

“You can’t get everything you hope for,” Joy told her.

Sitting together in a crowded ’bus, with Biddy on another seat some distance away, Mary and Ruth snatched a few private words on the way home.

Mary’s eyes met Ruth’s, pathetic still in their bewilderment. “Isn’t it queer?” was all she had to say.

“Joy? Yes, it seems queer to us, but we had seen only our own side of it,” Ruth said vigorously. “It’s as I said, Mary. She’s forgotten there was any trouble. She never felt there was any, except at the moment. She never dreamt she was upsetting you so. She’s just herself, as friendly as ever. It’s up to you now to respond to her friendliness, if you want things to go on as they were. She’s even asked you to the Abbey again straight away. And Biddy’s happy about it. It’s only you.”

Mary stared out of the window at the lights of Oxford Circus, her eyes troubled and wistful. “I’ve lost something,” she said at last. “Of course I’ll respond, Ruth. I’m very fond of Joy. I don’t want anything to come between us. But I thought she understood. I can’t understand her not feeling this. If”—her voice quivered—“if she’d said she was sorry, how I’d have loved her for it! But just to forget it!—not to have cared at all! It hurts more, almost, than when she was angry. You see, it shows that she’s never troubled to understand me one atom. There’s no reason that she should, I know. But—I thought she cared more about me.”

“You’re tired, old thing,” Ruth said gently, “and you’ve been through a lot to-night. Think it all over quietly to-morrow. Or wait still longer, if you can. In a little while you’ll be able to get outside it all, as if it were something in one of your stories, and see Joy’s side of it as well

as your own. You always can, you know; you always do. Other people may not, perhaps; but you do! Wait till then, before you pass final judgment on Joy.”

“I’m not angry with her, or resenting it, or anything like that,” Mary said wearily. “There’s no use in that. She didn’t mean it, and she doesn’t understand. But I am most awfully disappointed. And I feel something has gone that I used to have.”

“Yes, but don’t you think it’s something you’d made yourself?” Ruth asked, very gently. “Something your own imagination had created, old thing? Is it fair to blame Joy because she hasn’t lived up to your picture of her? You’ve loved an ideal Joy; if you’re finding the real one at last, can’t you love her, too?”

Mary’s face was very wistful. “I shall always love Joy. But I’d given her something, and I feel now that she didn’t want it.”

“She never knew you’d given it to her. She never knew what a tremendous lot you thought of her,” Ruth reminded her quietly.

## CHAPTER XXI

### BACK TO THE ABBEY

"I know all about it!" the Pixie announced to Ruth. "I understand it now. I've been afraid it would happen sometime."

"Did he tell you?" Ruth demanded. "Did he—oh, did he talk to you about Joy? But we didn't even know you knew him!"

Entering the upstairs luncheon-room off Oxford Street, with its cream-washed walls, and brown wood settles, and brown and yellow Doulton china, she had been dismayed to find the Pixie in earnest talk with a man; then amazed, when he turned, to see that it was Sir Andrew Marchwood. He had said good-bye at once, however, and left them to their lunch; and the Pixie explained.

"I've known him for some time; I know his young brother too, incidentally. Such a nice boy! He's growing coffee in Kenya now; and Sir Andrew visits him when he goes off on his wild expeditions. He's been telling me, he's just going off again, as soon as he can get things arranged to leave his mother for some months."

"But—going away? But what about Joy? Oh, has she sent him away again?" Ruth forgot Mary in her intense interest in this new development.

"Joy hasn't been consulted. She doesn't know yet. Don't tell her! That's his business, you know. Come and sit over here! I like this corner."

Ruth followed her. "Please tell me more!" she begged. "Have they quarrelled? If he told you, you can tell me, can't you?"

"Sir Andrew ought to talk to your Mary," the Pixie said grimly. "He won't, of course. But I fancy they're both feeling much the same. They've both been loving an imaginary Joy, and they're both up against the same problem now: do they love the real Joy well enough? Mary has to get down to it and work it out at home; he's going away till he feels sure of himself. Till now, it was Joy who wasn't sure; now it's the man. He's a *good* man!" she spoke with very definite emphasis. "I like him. Joy's very fortunate. He'll make something fine out of her yet. But he isn't soft. He fell in love with her pretty face, and her pretty ways; he always says she seemed the spirit of spring in England come to life, when he saw her at that Hamlet Club party, in her green dance-frock, a year ago. He thought she was all that's beautiful and good; he made a fancy picture of her, as Mary did; and he's been in love with it for a year. I've heard only to-day how he found out last week that there was another Joy; that she could be quick-tempered and forgetful and hasty, unjust to others in her own excitement. He saw through the whole of that little tragedy; he doesn't miss much! And now——"

"Oh, I'm sorry; and Mary will be sorry!" Ruth cried. "It was the first thing she said: 'I hope he didn't understand. He ought to think Joy's perfect.' But won't he come back, Pixie? For I think Joy really wants him all the time."

"Of course she loves him, but she hasn't found it out yet! If she should happen to think she has lost him, it may help her to find out what she really feels. Doesn't Mary realise that Joy isn't quite normal just now, and that's the reason? She's off her balance whenever he's about. Tell Mary, if she hasn't thought of that, for it's certainly the case! I think he'll come back. He's a good man, and he loves Joy. But he's got to realise he's going to marry a real girl, with real faults, and not a fancy picture. Who wants to live with fancy pictures, anyway? He'd be

tired of his ideal Joy, always sweet and kind and gentle, in a month; the real one will always give him plenty to think about! I'd rather have her as she is. She's just what she always has been, though she has improved a lot in the last few years. But she's impulsive and fiery and self-centred; and from what Joan and Cicely say she always has been."

"But sometimes she's seemed so kind and thoughtful!" Ruth remonstrated. "Mary's great grief is not at all that Joy forgot her at the show; that's a small thing to her; she doesn't care about herself in that way, in the least. It's Joy's want of understanding that has hurt Mary. Joy thought she had expected thanks, and evidently had no idea whatever of the joy Mary had felt in helping her," and she told quickly of Mary's letter, Joy's reply, Mary's postcard of remonstrance, and Joy's final silence. "And then last night she had forgotten it all, and was as friendly as ever! That was almost the biggest blow, to Mary. It had all meant so much to her, and had evidently been nothing at all to Joy. I said what I could; but I was surprised, too. For sometimes Joy has seemed to understand."

"Ah, but that's Jenny-Wren!" the Pixie said quickly. "You must remember that they talk everything over together, and Jen supplies the understanding and keeps Joy straight. I've seen them and heard them, and I know it's so. Jen has the gift; Joy has not. In this instance, Joy hadn't Jen to help her, or it would never have happened. Jen would never have let Joy send that letter! She'd have told her quite frankly that she was being an idiot, and she'd have made her see it, too. And I know something else. Poor Joy tries desperately hard, at times—when she isn't excited and being haunted by a man and in love without knowing it!—for just this very thing, to understand. I tell you, she has struggled hard to understand her Maidlin. She's continually marvelling at Jen, who knows intuitively how other people feel. Joy has never really grown up. How should she? She has had everything she wanted all her life. She's exactly what you would expect, when you remember the happy sheltered time she has had, with every luxury and every gift you can think of. It isn't fair to blame her because the one gift of understanding has been denied her; you can't expect her to have everything! She tries very hard to do right and to be kind and to use her position well; and on the whole she does do very well indeed."

"Oh, she does a lot for people, we know! Yes, I see what you mean," Ruth said thoughtfully. "May I repeat all this to Mary?"

"I want you to. And remind her of this, too. It's her own imagination, idealising Joy, turning her into a fairy princess, that has brought trouble now. Any one knowing the real girl would have said, 'Oh, it's only Joy! She'll get over it in a day or two!' But to Mary it has been a tragedy; it was bound to be, with her temperament. Remind her that her imagination, and her over-sensitiveness, and her power to think and analyse feeling, are the tools with which she's going to write books; good books! But she has to pay for them by times like these. She can do work that Joy could never touch; but only because she has the power and depth to suffer as Joy could never do. She has to pay for her temperament. Tell her that!"

"I'll tell her it all," Ruth said gratefully. "Is it wrong to idealise people like that?" she asked, after a pause. "I can see the danger of it, but is it wrong?"

"No! It's right. We all do it. But the time comes when you lose the ideal, and then you find out whether you really love your friends or not. If you can't stand the crash, when you find out that they have faults like other people, your love for them wasn't worth much. If you really love them, it makes no difference. You go on just the same, and make allowances. You may even love them more, because you've discovered their weakness."

"You do understand! And you do have jolly ideas!" Ruth said fervently.

“Now don’t you begin idealising me!” the Pixie said, very hurriedly, and laughed, and gave her attention to lunch.

Mary listened thoughtfully to all Ruth had to say that evening, but made almost no comment at the time. “I like her way of looking at things. She’s a dear!—as she says about so many other people. I’m sorry Sir Andrew feels like that about Joy. It may be better he should know, but I’m sorry I was the cause of his finding it out. I hope it won’t be too long before he comes back to her; and I *do* hope she’ll never know why he went! Don’t tell Bidy any of this, Ruth. She wouldn’t understand, any more than Joy does.”

It was a week before she re-opened the subject; but she was writing busily in the meantime and the book was reaching its last chapters, so Ruth was satisfied. But one day there came a cordial letter from Joy, bringing an urgent invitation to all three to spend Easter at the Abbey, and to stay, if possible, for Jen’s Coronation in the following week.

“We shan’t have a corner in the Hall for you, I’m afraid,” Joy wrote. “The house is going to be packed with relations. And you know what it is with a baby; bibs and bottles on every chair! Janetta takes up as much space as three grown-ups. She’s really Janice, you know; but Jenny-Wren will call her Janetta. But though the house will be full, there’s always the Abbey, and I know you both love it, Mary and Ruth. (I understand that Bidy is to share Rosamunda’s room; I know Bidy won’t mind, and Ros and Maidie have set their hearts on it.) Ann Watson has a jolly little spare room in the Abbey, and it’s being got ready for you two now; and you can have the Abbey and all its ghosts to yourselves every night. Cicely and Miriam once spent a night there, but they never saw a single spook. I do hope you’ll come. We all hope you’ll come; Jenny-Wren says she won’t feel she’s being well and truly crowned unless Mary-Dorothy’s there. And she’s aching to know how the book’s getting on. So you fix it up at the office, and come on the Wednesday before Easter; that’s the day the children’s school breaks up. Jen’s simply living for the holidays, she says!”

Bidy was out when the letter came. Mary and Ruth read it together, since it was addressed to them both. Then they looked at one another.

“You’ll go, Mary-Dorothy?” Ruth asked anxiously.

Mary gave a little laugh. “I’m beginning to see the funny side of it, Ruthie.”

“The funny side?”

“Yes, of Joy’s unconsciousness. She’s so absolutely, blissfully ignorant of having done anything wrong. And I got so fearfully worked up about it! It has a funny side, once you see it.”

“You have got outside it all, as I said you’d have to do!” Ruth said warmly. “That’s what comes of being a writer of fiction, I suppose! You learn to look at things all round, not just from one angle. You look at yourself and Joy as if you were characters in your own story. Then you’ll go on loving her just the same, although you know she isn’t perfect?”

“I hadn’t any right to expect her to be perfect. I’m just anxious that she should never know anything about it. For she’d be really upset if she understood, Ruth.”

“She wouldn’t believe it,” Ruth said, with conviction. “She couldn’t understand it. Then we’ll go to the Abbey next week? Cheers!—oh, cheers! How I shall love to live in it!”

“There’s a P. S. for you,” said Mary, picking up another sheet. “‘Tell Ruth the bluebells are coming out, and the daffodils aren’t over, and the blackbirds can’t stop shouting about it, and the thrushes can only say: “Come and see! Come and see!” and the may is all over buds, and you can smell the Abbey half a mile away because the wallflower growing in every corner is so thick. So if she wants to see a real English spring, now’s her chance.’”

“I’ll take the chance!” Ruth said happily.

## CHAPTER XXII

### JOY IN TROUBLE

“Oh, my dears!” Jen pulled Mary and Ruth and Bidly out of the train. “I’m a broken-down wreck, the shadow of my former happy self! For three solid months I’ve swotted at French and hygiene and the theory of cookery and diet, and done prep. like an infant, and practised—just enough to soothe my music-mistress; not a shred more! Now I’m exhausted, and I’ve got brain-fag, and school’s broken up for a fortnight; and I don’t care what mad or silly thing I do first! But be sensible and well-behaved I will not. And if any one so much as mentions school to me I shall explode or die.”

“But you’ve enjoyed it?” Ruth asked, laughing.

“Every second of it. It’s been frightful fun. I don’t say the school’s always enjoyed *me*; but on the whole they’ve put up with me very well. But it has been a fearful swot, and I’m jolly well ready to chuck everything up and have a good time now. And if your professional literary mind objects to my school slang, Miss Devine Senior, you’ll have to stop in the Abbey and not come near me, that’s all. For I’ve picked up a lot of naughty little words from the dear children, that I’d begun to break myself of, and they keep coming out. In fact, the purity of my speech, my beautiful English, has suffered a bad relapse, and I now talk like a kid of fifteen instead of a grown woman, as I’m convinced I did when you first knew me.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed very much difference yet,” Mary said, her eyes on the happy face.

“How’s the book getting on? Are you going to finish it in the Abbey?” Jen asked eagerly.

Mary coloured, grateful for the real interest which had made Jen ask so soon. “To correct it, perhaps,” she said flushing.

“It’s finished?” Jen gave a shriek of delight. “Really finished? Oh, Mary-Dorothy, how tophole! And it will be dedicated to me, won’t it? I’ll be as proud of it as Joan is of Janetta!”

“It *is* dedicated to you,” Mary assured her. “Aren’t you my fairy-godmother?”

“I’ve grown two feet taller,” Jen solemnly assured Rosamund and Maidlin, who came racing up to claim Bidly.

“Crawl out of the station gate on your hands and knees, then!” Rosamund advised. “And for goodness’ sake stop! I shall need a step-ladder when I crown you, as it is. Or you’ll have to squat on the ground. Oh, Biddums, it is joyful to see you again!” and they dragged her and the suitcases to the waiting car.

“You’ll let me read it, Mary-Dorothy?” Jen pleaded. “I’m filled with fierce jealousy because I know Ruth’s read it first. You wouldn’t ask me to wait months and months, until it’s published—my own book?”

“Suppose it never is published?” Mary voiced her secret dread, with a little laugh. “It may not be good enough.”

“Oh, rubbish! Rot! It will be the success of the season, my dear girl!”

“It’s really *very* good,” Ruth said earnestly.

“Of course it is. Now tell me—no, don’t tell me anything! I want to hear about the town parties, and the Pixie and her classes, and her party, and your children’s show; Joy says it was tophole! But she wants to hear, too, and she won’t be home for an hour yet. She’s got a big new car; did you know? A thing like a pantehnicon—almost; so that she can take out whole families of cripples into the country during the summer. She’s bringing Lady Marchwood back



to the Manor in it to-day," and Mary and Ruth understood why they had been allowed to come by train.

Jen, acting hostess for Joy, showed them their room in the Abbey with a certain wistfulness; obviously she would have liked to be staying in it herself. It was next to the caretaker's rooms, built in the walls where the dormitory of the lay brothers of the Abbey had once been, and had a little door opening on to the cloisters, and long lancet windows looking out on the green lawn outside the walls, and the old gateway and the beech woods beyond.

"When Joan and Joy lived here, this was Joy's bedroom," Jen explained. "When they went to the Hall, Joan made this into a little private room for herself, where she could hide if visitors came to see the ruins while she was wandering in the Abbey. We've often taken refuge here. It makes a jolly little bedroom; and you've the whole Abbey for a sitting-room, or the cloisters when it's wet, or Ann's room next door for meals. But you'll be with us at the Hall most of the time."

"Oh, no, we won't!" Ruth said emphatically.

"I think we shall be here most of the time," Mary said in delight. "I love the thought of living in the Abbey."

"Don't tell Joy, but we like it far better than the Hall!" said Ruth.

Jen laughed. "I feel rather like that myself. But you must come and see us sometimes. Come up to the house now, and be introduced to my goddaughter! Ruth hasn't seen Joan yet, I suppose."

Joan, just another Joy in her bronze hair and pretty colouring, but with deeper thoughtfulness in her eyes than Joy had often known, was pushing her tiny red-haired daughter up and down the terrace in her pram. She greeted Mary as an old friend and Ruth as one of whom she had often heard, and proudly allowed them to look at little Janice.

"I call her Janetta," said the godmother. "That's one of my little jackets she's got on. I made her a bonnet, too, but she won't wear it. And the dinkiest little boots, if Joan would only haul her out for you to see. As for her little vest and——"

"They must come at bath time to see those," the mother said laughing. "Jen would like me to undress the poor child for every visitor, just to show off the knitted undies she made! They're very nice, I admit, and baby loves them; but to hear Jenny-Wren talk you'd think they were far more important than Janice herself."

"Well, they are rather nice, when she's inside them! Much nicer than they were before," Jen urged.

"That's so, Jenny-Wren," Joan admitted.

"Are you really going to be the new May Queen?" Mary looked across at Jen, as they sat in the sunshine on the terrace for afternoon tea.

"The children seem to want it," Jen's tone was elderly and maternal, but she could not hide the gleam in her eyes and the pleased flush on her cheeks. No one but herself knew quite how much she had regretted her early leaving school, which had lost her the chance of being Queen just when it had seemed to be coming to her at last. "I couldn't disappoint them when they'd set their little hearts on it, bless them!"

"They all want her, Mary-Dorothy," said Rosamund. "It's been real sport having her at school. They're all frightfully keen on her. But she's going to be a brown Queen. Doesn't it sound dingy?"

"Now, I appeal to you, Mary-Dorothy!" cried the Queen-elect. "Does brown need to be dingy? Think of your brown and gold pots! Think of the woods in autumn! Think of our

moors in winter!—the most glorious soft brown velvet!”

“You’ll choose a pretty brown, of course,” Mary said warmly. “With your hair it will be lovely,” and she looked at Jen’s crown of waving yellow curls.

“I think so!” Jen said haughtily. “I shall have buttercups on my train, and I shall carry brown and yellow wallflowers from the Abbey walls. My Maid’s to be the tiniest kid in the school, just a spot of an infant; the girls call us Goliath and the Midget, when they see us together! The Queens have bagged every other colour, Ruth. I’d have liked blue, and it is my colour; but they had a blue Queen quite early on.”

“What was Joy’s colour? I know she was a Queen,” Ruth asked, with interest.

“Oh, bright green! Couldn’t you have guessed? Joan was violet. Rosamunda is crimson. Cicely was golden. My brown will be beautiful and restful among them all. But really they didn’t leave me much choice. If Maidie’s the Queen some day, she’ll have to wear stripes.”

“I shall have pink,” said Maidlin.

“Do you mind living in the Abbey?” Joan turned to Ruth. “It’s not that we haven’t a room for you at present, though we shall be much more crowded after Easter. But Jen was sure you would like the Abbey; and we didn’t want to have to ask you to change next week. And mother gets so flustered now if we have too many staying in the house, so while Janice and I are here we try to keep numbers down as far as possible. She loves baby, but it worries her to have too many other people here. She isn’t fit for very much.”

“Oh, but we love the Abbey!” Ruth said warmly. “We’re delighted to have the chance of being there.”

“They like your Abbey better than Joy’s house, Joan,” said Jen. “But you’re not to say so to Joy.”

“Here comes Joy!” said Maidlin, and ran to meet the new big car.

Joy waved her hand, but drove away at once to the garage. She came back presently, her arm round Maidlin.

“There’s something wrong,” Jen said hurriedly, before they were near enough to hear. “Look at Joy’s face! She’s always laughing unless she’s cross or worried. There isn’t a laugh anywhere about her to-day.”

Joy said nothing of any trouble, however, and whatever it was, she was evidently bent on keeping it to herself. She greeted Mary and Ruth and Bidly warmly, if soberly, kissed Mrs. Shirley, who had come out at the sound of the motor, looked at Janetta, and demanded a cup of tea from Joan. Then she sat silent, while Bidly and Rosamund waited on her. Maidlin, knowing intuitively that she was in trouble, sat at her feet, one arm thrown across Joy’s knees in sympathy.

But silence, from Joy, was more eloquent than tears would have been from some girls. Her friends looked at one another in consternation. Joan’s face was anxious. Jen pursed her lips and frowned.

Mary and Ruth looked at one another in dismay.

“Has Sir Andrew told her he’s going away?” Ruth’s eyes asked.

“And has she suddenly found out how much she cares?” added Mary’s.

“Tired, Joy dear?” asked Mrs. Shirley. “Is that big car too much for you?”

“Have you killed Lady Marchwood and left her under a hedge?” Rosamund asked curiously.

Joy started and coloured, at something in her own thoughts. “I’m not tired. We had a good run. The car’s a beauty. Find me a name for her, Maidie! I’m going to take you all out in her

some day; the whole family.”

But though she tried to talk as usual, it was plain that her thoughts were busy elsewhere. She rose presently, without any word of explanation. “I’ll go and change. Oh, by the way!” and she turned in the doorway. “Madam has a son. I forgot to tell you. I heard yesterday.”

“You *forgot*?” cried Jen, in wrathful amazement, while Joan looked up, delight and relief in her face. “Joy Shirley, you *must* be in love! Forgot to tell us!—a boy, did you say? Of course, she would have a boy!”

“And are they both well, Joy? Did you hear any more? When was it?” Joan asked eagerly.

“Madam with a baby! Isn’t it funny to think of?” Jen said meditatively. “As funny as Cicely and Joan!”

“I hope she’ll be good to it,” Rosamund said darkly.

“He’s called Roger. Both very well,” Joy answered Joan briefly. “She loved your presents, Jenny-Wren, and sent very many thanks and her love. And she said, if you really made that vest during the Chelsea School, it was simply wonderful, for she could see it hadn’t been washed, and yet it was perfectly clean, and she knows what Chelsea is for dust. She was delighted to have all the things you and Joan sent,” and she turned and went into the house, leaving them talking over this exciting piece of news.

“All the same, there’s something wrong with Joy,” Jen said anxiously to Mary and Ruth, as she walked back to the Abbey with them, while Joan put her baby to bed, and Bidly ran upstairs to the room she was to share with Rosamund. “Madam and babies are all very well, and rather thrilling when you think of them together. But what matters to us is that Joy has shut herself up in her own room, and any one can see she’s got something on her mind. That old lady’s upset her somehow; or something has gone wrong in town. I’d give pounds to know what’s the matter!”

And though Ruth and Mary thought perhaps they could guess, they did not feel sure enough to speak.

There was a cloud over the Abbey and the Hall that night, for Joy remained silent and burdened and would not explain, and no one else could be light-hearted while she looked grave. It was so unusual, and her personality ruled the whole house so completely, that without Joy to set the pace even Jen and Rosamund were subdued, and Maidlin was miserable.

It was a state of matters that could not last very long. In desperation, after dinner, Jen took courage and forced her way into Joy’s room.

“Let me in, ‘Traveller’s Joy.’ It’s only your old Jenny-Wren. Now, you poor dear, tell me all about it!”—for Joy was sitting by the open window, staring out at the pear-blossom in the orchard with hopeless eyes.

An hour later, Jen ran through the twilight of the garden, through the old Abbey gate, the Abbot’s garden, and the tresant passage, and sped like a white ghost across the cloister garth.

“Mary-Dorothy! Ruth! Are you in bed? Then come out and talk to me! I must have some one,” she said feverishly, “and you’re best. I’ve talked it over with Ruth already, and I know Mary understands. Joy’s gone to talk to Joan; but I want to know what you think, Mary-Dorothy. You’re to tell me what would happen next if it were in a story. It’s your job to see the way out of tangles of this kind!” She caught up cushions and a rug, and spread them on the step leading from the cloister down to the garth. “Put on your coats, and lend me a woolly or something. I forgot to get mine. Thanks! Now listen!” when they were seated and waiting eagerly.

“Has Joy told you her trouble?” Mary asked anxiously.

“It’s that man. Being in love’s a fearful disease!” Jen sighed. “I hope I never catch it. But we must help Joy now, or she’ll never be happy again; and I don’t know how to do it. On the way home in the car, his mother told Joy he was going away again. And this time it’s different. Last time Joy sent him away for a little while, till she would feel sure about herself; but she knew he’d come back. This time he hasn’t told her he’s going; or said anything about coming back. He’s just going to come and say good-bye in a day or two. And she doesn’t know if he will ever come back. She thinks perhaps she’s been too long making up her mind, and he’s tired of waiting; and now she knows she wants him. She knew as soon as Lady Marchwood told her he was going. The question is, how can we stop him?”

“You’re sure she does care?” Mary asked thoughtfully.

“Oh, she cares right enough. If he’d come and ask her now, they’d be engaged straight away. If only we could tell him! But how can we? Mary-Dorothy, what can we do? What would girls in a book do?”

But Mary was strangely unhelpful. Gazing across the garth at the arched doorway and windows of the chapter-house, she said slowly, “It seems to me we can only wait. None of us can go and ask him to ask Joy again.”

“She says she’ll do it herself!” Jen said darkly. “Of course she won’t; Joan won’t let her. But she did say she thought she’d tell him she’d changed her mind. The trouble is, she thinks perhaps he’s changed his. She hasn’t seen much of him in town for the last ten days; his mother says he’s been making preparations for going away. Joy’s got an awful fear that he’s been avoiding her because he’s discovered he doesn’t like her enough; and now he’s going away rather than say so.”

“She’ll know, when he comes to say good-bye,” said Mary. “She’ll know if his feelings have changed. Besides, he’ll tell her; he’s a decent sort.”

“Yes,” Ruth agreed. “Either he’ll say, ‘I shall always love you for ever, however far I go,’ or he won’t. I think she’ll know, Jenny-Wren.”

“I won’t answer for Joy,” Jen said gloomily. “She does things in a hurry and thinks about them afterwards. She always has done. She may say anything if she’s worked up to it! You aren’t very helpful, Mary-Dorothy! Can’t your imagination see any way out of the mess? Has he got to go off indefinitely, leaving Joy miserable? There must be some way to stop him!”

“I’d like to think it over. After all, you wouldn’t expect to do anything to-night,” Mary pointed out.

“Well, hardly,” Jen admitted. “But I did want to tell somebody. Don’t tell Joy I came, though!”

“Could you wait a moment?” and as Jen rose, Mary disappeared into the little bedroom.

She returned in a moment, and handed a flat parcel to Jen. “Don’t look at it while you’re worrying about Joy,” she said shyly.

Jen caught the manuscript to her breast. “Not look at it? I shall sit up and read it this very night!” she cried rapturously. “I can’t help Joy by worrying, so I shan’t worry any more. She’s got Joan and her aunt; she doesn’t need me. This will help me to forget. I assure you, it will be the greatest comfort to me, Mary-Dorothy! Thanks a billion times!” and she raced off, clasping the story in her arms.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MAN NEXT DOOR

“We know more than Jen does,” Mary said to Ruth, after a time of silent strenuous thought. “We know what has made Sir Andrew change his mind. I hate to think it has something to do with me. I’d help in any way, if I could. . . . Jen mustn’t know; we can’t give Joy away. It would mean telling too much. That’s why I couldn’t say much to her. And Joy mustn’t know either.”

“It might be good for her,” Ruth hinted.

“It might make her hate me for ever!” Mary retorted. “Let’s get to bed!”

“I wonder if Jen’s sitting up over your story?”

Mary flushed. “I shall worry till I know how she likes it. So if I’m irritable you must put up with me.”

“She’ll like it, old thing! You needn’t be nerry!” Ruth said encouragingly.

During the night, she knew Mary was not sleeping, and wondered whether the story or Joy was to blame. But Mary did not explain. There was nothing in her manner, as they sat down to a country breakfast in Ann’s little sitting-room, to hint that she was nerving herself to an act of real courage for Joy’s sake.

They were still enjoying Ann’s ham and eggs and butter and honey, and revelling in the sense of holiday-making and of freedom from all engagements and business ties, when Mary remarked, “Jen’s coming across the cloister garth,” and her colour rose nervously.

“Coming to tell you how much she likes your first child,” said Ruth cheerfully. “Didn’t I tell you so? Does she look as if she hasn’t been to bed?”

“No, she looks as fresh as the morning,” Mary retorted. “And she isn’t bringing it back finished, either. I don’t expect she’s read a word of it yet.”

“Trust Jenny-Wren! Don’t you know her better than that? You know you’re talking rot,” Ruth said kindly. “You know very well she was going to rush straight up to her room and tear open the parcel.”

“Perhaps there’s more to tell about Joy,” said Mary.

“Perhaps she rang up Sir Andrew and asked him not to go,” Ruth mocked.

Jen stood in the arched doorway. A sudden fit of shyness had made Mary unable to go to meet her; she would have run away, but there was nowhere to run to. Jen saw her feeling written in her face, and understood.

“Mary-Dorothy, I’ve come to say thank you! Do you know that I sat up half the night, having the jolliest read I’ve had for ages?”

“Do you like it, really?” Mary asked doubtfully.

“My dear, it’s great! It’s really good, I’m sure of that. And it’s such fun! I loved every word of it. But I cried once; you know where! Well, nearly cried, then! I was quite angry with you. After that I simply had to go on to the end. It’s tophole! I’m dying to try it on Maidlin, and see how it appeals to a real kid. But I know they’ll all love it. I’m proud of it, and I’m proud of you, Mary-Dorothy!”

“I am glad you’re pleased!” there was a world of relief in Mary’s tone. “If it’s ever published——”

"If! My dear girl, you needn't say if! They'll all jump at it, if they've any sense! You'll get it typed quickly, and send it to some one, won't you? I'm dying to see it as a book!"

"So am I," Mary admitted, with a laugh. "I'll type it as soon as I can, if there's nothing you think I ought to change?"

"Not a word! But I'm going to read it again, really carefully. I simply flew through it last night; and I kept thinking Joy would see that my light was still on, and come to know what I meant by it."

"How is she this morning?"

"I haven't seen her. She was away out before I came down. I was late, but that was your fault! May I keep the book for a few days, Mary-Dorothy? I want to read it again. I won't show it to any one without your leave. Now what are you going to do this morning? Since Joy's got something as big as Andrew Marchwood so heavily on her mind, I must look after you for her! I'm quite sure Ros and Maidie will see to Biddy."

Mary looked up, shy colour in her face. "Might I go for a walk in the woods by myself? I won't lose my way."

Ruth and Jen looked at her quickly. "Don't mind me!" said Ruth. "I'd just love to wander about the Abbey and see it all again."

"Are you going to think out a new story?" Jen asked curiously of Mary. "Then we mustn't worry you. I suppose you have to get away by yourself now and then! I'm sure you'll find this is a jolly good place for thinking in. Good luck to the new book! If it's half as good as this one, it will be worth while."

"It's got to be better," Mary said, flushing.

"It will have to be jolly good, then," Jen said warmly.

For a time, when she had gone, Mary and Ruth wandered together among the ruins, talking earnestly. The Abbey was as they had never seen it before, draped in wallflower, which clung to every wall and crack and cranny. "Joan has allowed it for this year," Jen had explained, the night before. "It sowed itself, from the gardens; so we stuck in some more in every hole we could find; and now you can smell the Abbey for miles, almost. She says if the plants do any harm, we'll pull them out in the autumn; but for one spring she doesn't think they'll matter." So the ruined walls were hung with brown and gold, and all the air was scented.

"I'm sure it's the best thing to do," Mary said. "I'm 'scared stiff,' as Biddy would say; but I feel it's got to be done, and the sooner the better."

"I'm coming with you," Ruth said soberly. "It's downright sporting of you, considering all that's happened. It's not merely going out of your way to do Joy a good turn; it's doing a thing that's really hard for you to do. For you are frightened, Mary-Dorothy. That's why I'm coming. You're as plucky as you can be; but I'm coming to hold your hand. I'm going to see you through."

"I'll be glad to have you," Mary confessed.

"I wish Joy could know!" Ruth said wistfully. "And Jen still more! I suppose we couldn't just tell Jen, Mary-Dorothy?"

"No! It would be giving Joy away. I'd hate for Jen to know all that happened in town, Ruth."

"She ought to know," Ruth insisted, but Mary would not agree.

They walked through the woods together, talking all the way because they were too nervous for silence, and because, as Mary said, "It's never any use planning what you'll say

beforehand. You never say any of it when it comes to the time.” Ruth, strange to an English spring, marvelled at the bareness of the beeches and wondered when they “were going to start for this year.” She wanted to know the name of every bird that called overhead, and of every flower under the hedges as they went through the lanes; and Mary told her what she could.

But when they entered the gates of the Manor, they were both silent, from sheer fright; Mary was white as she asked steadily if she could see Sir Andrew, and Ruth was glad she had not let her come alone.

When he appeared, however, he was not the silent unapproachable great man whom Rosamund and Maidlin rather dreaded, but the kindly understanding friend who had spoken to them at Joy’s concert; and their dread of him vanished, though not their fear of how he would take what they had to say.

He greeted them as friends, which was reassuring. Mary rushed into her errand at once, as she always did when very much afraid.

“Forgive me for troubling you when I know you must be busy! And please remember that Joy doesn’t know I have come; she hasn’t an idea. None of them know. We’re living in the Abbey, and they think we’ve gone out in the woods. But last night Jen Robins told us you were going away.”

He assented, looking puzzled; a shadow had filled his eyes at mention of Joy.

“Forgive me if I’m wrong,” Mary pleaded. “But I can’t help fearing that what happened that night at the children’s concert may be to blame.”

His eyes met hers in instant understanding. He asked quietly, “How do you mean, Miss Devine?”

“I had loved Joy Shirley so, for a year,” Mary spoke breathlessly. “She had been so good to me. I’d thought her perfect. Of course it was foolish, but I hadn’t believed she had any faults. That night, and for some days afterwards, I felt as if I’d lost her. And the Joy who was left wasn’t the Joy I’d loved.”

She saw that she had his attention now. Every word she said might have been the expression of his own feeling for Joy. She went on swiftly, no longer choosing her words carefully, but revealing by their warmth the depth of her love for Joy.

“I found after a while that I was wrong. All I had lost was my own picture of her. I still loved the real Joy, although she had faults. She has so much that’s good and beautiful in her. And—and if some one she loved very much helped her, perhaps she would get over the weaknesses. Don’t you think perhaps she needs some one to help her? She’s had people to love her all her life, and she’s loved them too, of course. But if she loved some one very very much, and wanted to be good enough for him, don’t you think it might help her to conquer some things in herself?”

His face had lit up in interest as she began to speak; but the light went out of it suddenly. “I see your point. You are probably right. But I cannot help her, Miss Devine. It is the thing I want to do with all my heart. But Joy does not care for me in that way. Some one else may help her. I am not the right man. I have hoped at times that she might care, but she still holds me off. Then—I think you know—all you have felt is true of me also. I saw a new side of her character that night; and though I loved her still, I realised, as you did, that there was another Joy I had never known. If I thought she wanted me, it would make no difference. But I have no reason to think she does, or that I could help her.”

“I can’t give her away,” Mary said wistfully. “But please, oh, *please!*—don’t go till you’re quite sure! Don’t just go to say good-bye! It will hurt her so—if she cares. Tell her you’re

thinking of going, and see if she seems to mind. Perhaps you'll decide not to go, after all!"

"Do you mean—?" he began, his face lighting up again in excitement. Then he checked himself. "But you're right. I must ask her herself."

"He won't go! He won't go!" Ruth danced down the avenue. "Oh, if *only* Joy could know what you've done for her, Mary-Dorothy!"

A letter lay waiting for Mary in the Abbey. She looked at it, turning whiter than she had done at the Manor door. Then she tore it open, glanced at it, and with an incredulous laughing cry threw it across to Ruth. Then hand in hand they ran through the Abbey, into the Hall, to find Jen.

"I must tell you first of all!" Mary panted, catching her in the garden. "That Writing Person, in London, told me to type my first few chapters and send them, with a synopsis of the rest, to a publisher, because it's getting so late for this year. And this is a letter to say he likes the beginning and the idea of the story very much, and if the rest comes up to the opening chapters, he'll be pleased to publish it this year and to give me £50 for the copyright!" She stopped for breath.

"Mary!" Jen gasped. "Mary Devine! Really? Oh, how simply gorgeous! I thought it couldn't be till next year! Come and tell everybody! Does Bidy know? Won't Joy be pleased? Oh, Mary-Dorothy, I *am* so glad!"

"Of course, it's worth heaps more than fifty pounds!" Jen said grudgingly later, when Bidy, Ros and Maidie, Joan and Mrs. Shirley and Janetta, had all been collected on the terrace to hear the great news. "Still, for a first time, I think you should accept it."

"I wasn't thinking of refusing," Mary said, with a laugh. "I hope the rest will satisfy the dear man! Perhaps it won't be good enough."

"My dear old thing, it gets better and better as it goes on!" Jen said exuberantly. "The parts I cried over, and laughed most over, are all in the last half!"

They had not been able to find Joy. So far as any one knew, she was out alone in the woods somewhere.

But while they were all talking excitedly, except Janetta, who showed no interest in Mary's book, Joy appeared from the avenue. She came walking across the lawn, swinging her hat.

"Something's happened. Look at her face!" Jen whispered. "Glory! Has he—has she —?"

"Joy, have you heard about Mary?" cried Rosamund, the unobservant.

But Joy did not hear her, nor Mary's swift indignant remonstrance. She came up the bank to the terrace with a bound, and stood looking round at them all; and not even Rosamund could mistake the change in her now.

"Dear people, I'm going to marry the man next door," she announced airily.

"Oh, I'm glad we were here!" Mary whispered happily to Ruth, while Joan and Jen were kissing those parts of Joy which had not disappeared in her aunt's arms, and the children were asking excited questions. "But she must never know, Ruthie!"

"The future Lady Marchwood!" Jen announced dramatically, when she could speak connectedly again.

"Isn't it absurd? I wish he wasn't," Joy was not by any means coherent yet.

"I'm not nearly good enough," she said later on, when they all sat talking it over together. "We met in the woods; he was coming to see me. When I said I would, you know"—there was no need to say what—"we had a *very* heart-to-heart talk! I told him I didn't feel good enough.



You others don't know him yet, but he's big all round in every way; and I'm not. I've always known it. I'm selfish; well, self-centred, then!" at the universal protest. "I see only my own side of things. I've a horrible fear I may some day do something dreadful, that would really hurt some one, just for want of thought. I don't know, as Jenny-Wren always does somehow, what other people will feel. I don't understand people. I see the danger of it, and I'm often afraid. He understands, and he'll help me. He's promised to tell me whenever I do anything brutal without knowing it."

"You wouldn't, 'Traveller's Joy,'" said Jen.

"You couldn't, Joy," said Maidlin.

"Oh, but I could. You're dears, both of you; but I know better," Joy said restlessly. "But I am going to try, and he's going to help me. I'd hurt him most of all, if I hurt any one else; because he's so kind, and he cares so much for me. I couldn't bear to do that; so I shall try very hard."

In the joyful excitement, Mary's book was forgotten. So it was no surprise to her and Ruth to see Joy and Jen come together across the garth that evening.

"Jen's told her about you, and she's come to say she's glad," said Ruth.

But Joy had still more to say. Her congratulations on the publisher's offer were very hearty; but when they were off her mind, there was still one thing to be said.

"Mary-Dorothy, in the woods this morning, he told me all about it," she began abruptly.

"Oh, cheers for Sir Andrew!" Ruth murmured joyfully. "Mary would *never* have told her!"

"I've come to say I'm sorry," Joy said humbly. "I'm too happy to be really sorry about anything else, but I am really sorry I treated you so badly. He says I did; and it's true. I love him because he sees how hateful I can be, but loves me all the same. I didn't want him to worship me as if I were a marble image! He knows; but he still wants me more than anything else in the world. Mary, I was cruel to you; the very thing I was so much afraid of; and I'd never have known if he hadn't told me. But you love me all the same; and you've given me the greatest happiness of my life to-day. Mary, I'm so very sorry I hurt you so!"

"I didn't want you to know. I'd never have told you. He shouldn't have done it," Mary whispered brokenly.

"He told me every word you said; you were very generous. And he said you were frightened of him; you needn't have been, but it was brave of you to go, Mary-Dorothy! I'm glad Ruth went with you. But I'm so sorry I didn't understand. It's because Jen wasn't there. She keeps me straight, you know. I'll never forget how good you've been, doing such a big thing for me when I'd hurt you so."

"Mary-Dorothy, thank you most of all for this," said Jen, and bent and kissed her gratefully.

[The end of *The Abbey Girls in Town* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]