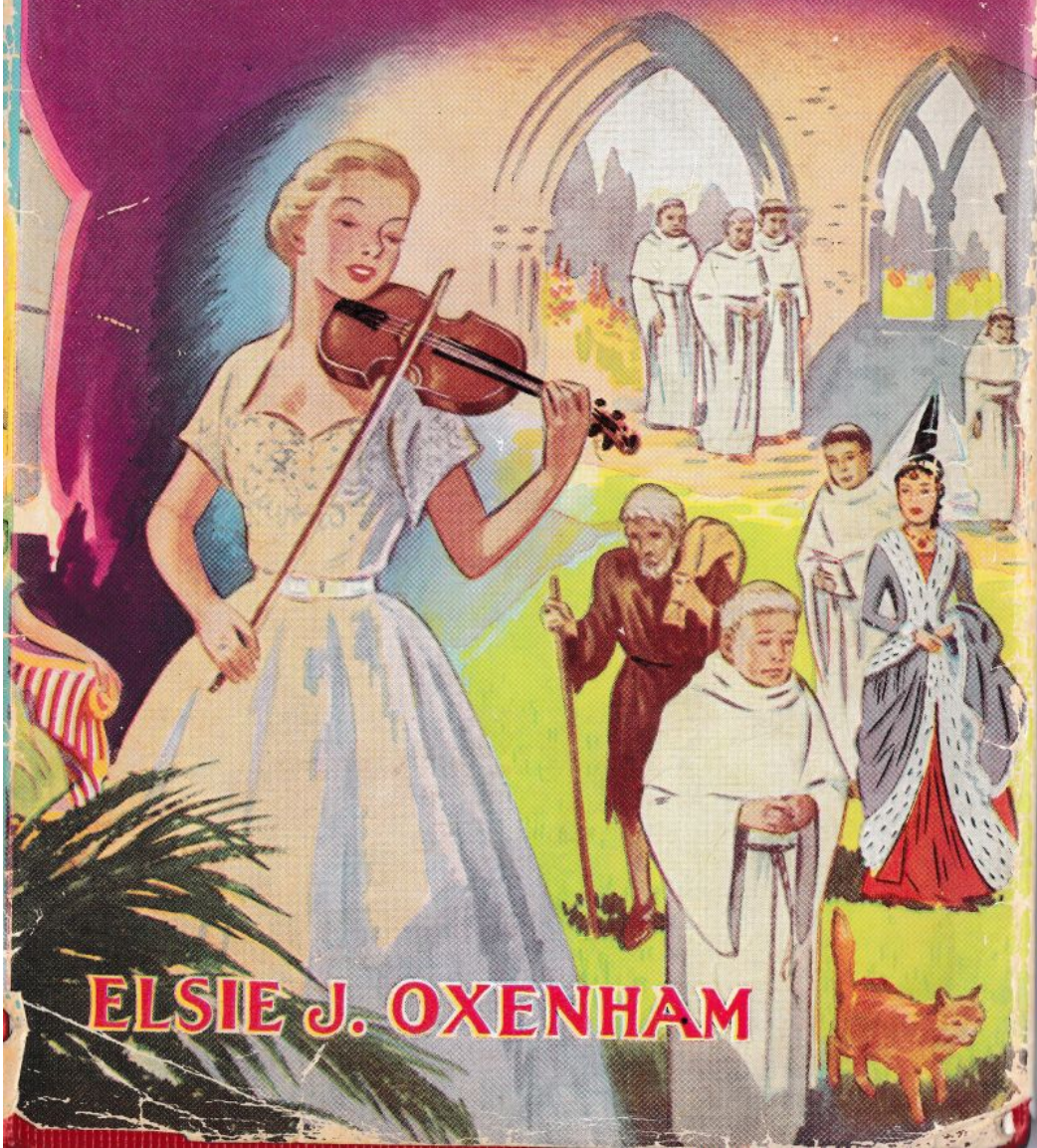


The SONG of the ABBEY



ELSIE J. OXENHAM

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They walked through the garden.

S.O.A. See Chapter 24

THE SONG OF THE ABBEY

by

ELSIE J. OXENHAM

COLLINS

LONDON AND GLASGOW

This Impression 1959

To
ALICE A. MANNING
with all good wishes
and many thanks
for help
in many ways

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CHAPTER I

TESSA'S TROUBLE

"What's the matter with Tessa?" Nanta asked, as Frost held open the door of the car and the school party crowded in.

She was the reigning May Queen and Tessa was her successor, to be crowned on May-Day. But this was still only March, and Nanta was troubled by the cloud on the face of the Queen-elect.

"Same old thing," said Jansy Raymond. "I had to take a message to her from the Head, while you orchestra people were hard at it, and Tessa was letting herself go about to-morrow night. She hates being left out."

"It's jolly hard on Tessa," said one Abbey twin, from her corner. "I wouldn't like it a scrap."

"I'd be bursting mad," said the younger twin.

They came together in the car every day, a jolly friendly party. The babes, tucked into the front seat beside the chauffeur, were Rosemary and Michael Marchwood, she aged nearly ten and he almost seven. Rosemary was a dark little person, with smooth short hair and beautiful brown eyes; Mike was big and fair and sturdy and was the life of the Kindergarten class. Their home was at the Manor and their mother, Jen Marchwood, had been the Beech Brown Queen at school fifteen years before.

Next in age, and living next door at the Hall, were their twin cousins, Elizabeth and Margaret Marchwood. Now almost fourteen, they had made their mark at school, both at cricket and in the orchestra. Jansy Raymond had been fifteen at Christmas; her mother and theirs were cousins and Jansy spent her schooldays at the Hall, as her home was in the country. She was very like the twins, with the same beautiful dark red hair, but hers was worn in two plaits, which were growing long, while the younger girls still had bobbed curls.

Nanta, the eldest of the party, nearly nineteen, was the reigning Queen Lavender, a Cookery student, who was leaving school at the end of the term. A tall fair girl, with yellow hair wound round her head in big plaits, she looked grown-up and responsible, and none of the younger crowd would have questioned her authority.

"Not now that she does her hair like that," Jansy had said one day. "She looks much more grown-up. When she stuck it over her ears in head-phones, it looked as if she'd just rolled it up so that it wouldn't go into her soup. But when she came back after the Christmas hols, with that big crown like Mother's—well, we remember now that she's really Lady Rosalind and we're properly respectful."

"I copied your mother's way of doing her hair," the victim had retorted. "Virginia has been doing hers this way, and everybody seems to like it. I always want to look like Virginia."

Her name was Rosalind Atalanta Kane, but Atalanta had been shortened into Nanta by her sisters as soon as they could speak. Their father had been the Earl of Kentisbury for one week before he died, and that week had given a much-disliked title to the girls. Their Aunt Rosamund, the present Lady Kentisbury, had decreed that Nanta must use her first name, as "Lady Atalanta" would be undesirable, so everyone had tried to turn her into Rosalind, and the name was always used at school and when she visited Kentisbury. But at home it had been too difficult and Nanta had kept her nickname.

"I may be half-witted," said Joy Quellyn, the mother of the twins, "but I keep mixing her up with Rosamund. After all, Ros lived here for eight years! I find myself saying Rosamund all the time. She'll have to be Nanta."

"I'd much rather be Nanta," Rosalind assured her.

"It's plain laziness with me," said Jen Marchwood. "I don't try to remember, because I like Nanta so much better. Nanta she shall be, and Rosamund must put up with it. Nanta can be Rosalind at school and at Kentisbury, but at home it's too confusing."

The elder sisters were now married. Virginia, living in Wiltshire, had a baby daughter, to whom Nanta was godmother and in whom she delighted. When she left school she would live with Virginia and Nancy Rose, and she was looking forward to it greatly. Till her school life was over, she, like Jansy, lived at the Hall, with the twins and several babies and their parents, Joy and Ivor Quellyn.

She was knitting her brows over Tessa's trouble as they drove home that Friday evening. "I wish we could help, but nobody can do anything. Tessa will just have to put up with it," she said.

"If the show was in Wycombe, I wouldn't be surprised if Tessa slipped out and went on her own," Jansy hinted. "She's so terrifically keen."

"I wouldn't blame her," Margaret Marchwood remarked.

"Oh, Margaret! Of course you would," Nanta cried. "She couldn't go behind her aunt like that!"

"She can't, as it's in London. Tessa's sometimes a bit mad," said Elizabeth darkly, "but she's not as mad as that. She couldn't go to London on her own at night."

"Tessa isn't mad any more, now that she's been chosen Queen," Nanta said quickly. "It's made all the difference. She used to do mad things, but she's quite sensible now."

"All the same, I'm glad the show isn't any nearer home. Tessa knows we're all going, even Rosemary. She's raging at being left out. It's partly because she's the new Queen," Jansy added. "She's been feeling important; you know she has, Nanta Rose! This has been a horrible shock to her."

Nanta looked at her severely. "Will you never forget my baby name, Lob?"

"Never," Jansy, the Lobelia Queen of a year ago, said cheerfully. "I like it. I always think of you as Nanta Rose."

"Then please stop! Nanta is babyish enough, without anything tacked on to it."

"It's not babyish, only friendly. I couldn't possibly stop; I shall always call you Nanta Rose. I remember not to do it at school," Jansy urged. "I'll call you 'my lady', if you like it better. Oh well, I won't!" she said hurriedly, at the look Nanta gave her. "I promised Tessa we'd tell her every single thing about to-morrow night," she went on. "But it didn't cheer her up at all."

"Did you expect it would?" Nanta asked grimly. "Tessa wants to be there, not to hear about it afterwards."

"She wants to be able to say she was there," Margaret said. "She doesn't want to feel left out."

"Because she's the next Queen," Elizabeth agreed. "I'd feel just the same myself."

It was very hard on Tessa, and everyone was full of sympathy. Saturday night was to be a great occasion. Two and a half years before, the dancer, Mary Damayris, had met with an accident, and her career in ballet had seemed ended. She had recovered from the injury to her hip, but had been unable to dance again; with her sister Rachel she had come to the old Abbey

which belonged to Jansy's mother, to take the place of their aunt, who had been the caretaker. Putting away all thoughts of ballet, she had dropped her stage name and had become once more Damaris Ellerton, and had bravely built up a new life, making a beautiful garden round the gate-house of the Abbey, while Rachel acted as guide to the ruins. As Guardians of the Abbey they had been happy enough, but to Damaris this had been only second-best, and she had always kept the longing for ballet and the theatre.

Then, one wonderful night—the night of Nanta's crowning as Queen Lavender—she had announced that she was going to dance again, to be Mary Damayris once more. The power she had lost had come back, and all the excitement and glamour of the theatre would be possible to her. Months of training had followed, but now, at last, she was ready, and on Saturday night she was to make her triumphant come-back to the stage.

Everyone would be there. Even little Rosemary was to be allowed to go. It would be a night of joy and thrills and thanksgiving. Mary Damayris would have an overwhelming greeting from the crowd who had loved her.

Tessa had written to her mother, who was in the South of France, recovering from a bout of influenza, begging to be allowed to go. Her mother had been perfectly willing, if the aunt who was taking charge at home consented. If not, she said, she would take Tessa herself, as soon as she returned. But that, to Tessa, would not be the same thing at all. It was the wonderful first night that attracted her, when Mary Damayris would be welcomed by the crowd.

And Aunt Edith had objected; had flatly refused to go herself or to send Tessa with anyone else. She did not care for ballet, and she felt it was unsuitable for a schoolgirl. No pleading had been any use; she would not go, and Tessa must not go either. What her mother did on her return was no business of Aunt Edith's, but for herself she would have nothing to do with the project.

It was no wonder Tessa was in despair. Many of her school friends would be there, and especially all the crowd from the Abbey. Nanta and Jansy, the two Queens before her, were going, and she, the next Queen, must stay at home.

She was desperately unhappy and very angry. At school everybody heard of her trouble. At home she was silent, and Aunt Edith was hard and determined.

CHAPTER II

CAROL CARTER

“And what’s the matter with Tessa?” A fair-haired smartly-dressed woman stopped the Queen-elect on her way home from school. “You look extremely grim, my dear! What’s up? Has the school found another Queen? I thought you were ready to jump over the moon because you’d been chosen.”

Tessa looked at Carol Carter, who was an acquaintance, though not a close friend, of her mother’s. Carol was about thirty-seven, unmarried, smart and lively, and she seemed to spend her life, from what Tessa had heard, at bridge-parties, dances, and the theatre. She appealed strongly to the reckless side of Tessa, which had been in evidence when she first changed over from ordinary school work and became a half-grown-up Cookery student, but which had been suppressed after a hint from Nanta that it was likely to hinder her chance of election as Queen. Tessa wanted to be Queen of the Hamlet Club more than anything in the world; she had eagerly subdued her wilder side, and the Club had joyfully chosen her as Queen.

“Well, what’s the trouble?” Miss Carter asked again.

Tessa boiled over, pouring out her story, as she had done at school.

“And I know her; Mary Damayris! Her sister lives in the Abbey, and I’ve been there to tea. The last time I went home with Jansy and Rosalind we went into the Abbey and she was there, Mary Damayris herself, and the man she’s going to marry in June, when she leaves the stage for good. He’s awfully nice and she’s as jolly as anything. She said she’d try to come to my crowning. And—and I can’t go to her first night! It’s filthy! It’s foul! I loathe Aunt Edith! She’s a stick!”

Carol Carter looked at her thoughtfully. “How brutal of your aunt! It won’t be at all the same thing to go in a fortnight, when your mother comes back.”

“Not a scrap the same.” Tessa’s voice broke. “They’ll all have been by that time. It’s the first night I want to see.”

“Yes, of course. She’ll have a wild welcome. Your aunt doesn’t understand. Can’t you make her see?”

“I’ve talked till I’m tired. She gets grimmer and grimmer and then she shuts me up.”

“You’re sure your mother would have let you go?”

“She said so. But it made no difference to Aunt Edith.”

“Come in here with me,” Carol said abruptly, and turned in to a tea-shop and ordered tea and cakes. “I won’t keep you long. Now listen, child!”

Tessa did not like being called “child,” but she listened, with widening eyes.

“I have two seats for to-morrow night,” said Carol Carter. “I was taking a young cousin, but it doesn’t matter so much to her as to you. She doesn’t know any of these people and she has never seen ballet. I could take her next week. Could you slip out and join me? I’d have my car by the church at six o’clock, and I’d bring you home to your own gate. Would you like to risk it? What about Auntie?”

Why she did it she hardly knew. She was sorry for the girl’s disappointment and she liked her. She did not question her own action more deeply than that. But far down in her mind was the thought that if Tessa found herself in trouble it would make difficulties for the Club, who had chosen her as Queen. And Carol Carter did not like the Hamlet Club.

Tessa did not stop to think of the Club or her future crown. "Would you?" she cried. "You couldn't be so kind! To-morrow! I may be there, after all! Oh, Miss Carter, would you really? Would your cousin mind?"

"My cousin will put up with it. But what about your aunt?"

"I don't care about her," Tessa said recklessly. "Mother said I might go. That's all that matters. I could slip out easily. There'll be a row when I get back, but I don't mind that."

"Leave a note on your pillow to say you are quite safe and that I'm taking you in my car. Then she won't be worried, though she may be mad."

"She will be mad!" Tessa laughed excitedly. "But I don't care. It's her own fault."

"Yes, she is very unreasonable. I don't see that you will be committing a great crime. You have your mother's approval."

"Mother said, if Aunt Edith was willing," Tessa had an honest side and it forced her to the admission. "She didn't mean me to go without telling anybody."

"But she will feel that your aunt was unreasonable too," Carol pointed out smoothly.

Tessa, only too eager to be persuaded, accepted the specious argument and plunged joyfully into plans for the great event.

"Our seats are in the stalls, so you'll have to dress," said Carol. "Don't meet your aunt on your way out! You could hardly pretend you were going for a walk."

Something jarred on Tessa; the secrecy—"You could hardly pretend." She thrust away the thought. "I'll be very careful, Miss Carter."

"Oh, call me Carol! We're going to have an adventure together. We'll have a little dinner somewhere, before going to the theatre."

Tessa's face glowed. This was an adventure, indeed! "You are a jolly good sort!" she exclaimed.

Carol smiled. "I hope you'll enjoy it," she said graciously. "I shall enjoy having your company. You'll be much more thrilled about it than my cousin."

Tessa went home treading on air. "Suppose I hadn't met her to-night? It's wonderful!"

She was at the appointed spot in good time, her yellow frock covered by a big coat, a scarf over her short dark curls. Her eyes were very bright and her cheeks were pink. So were Carol Carter's, but Tessa's fine colour was entirely natural.

"Any difficulties?" Carol asked gaily. "Did you creep down the back stairs? Or did you bribe the maids?"

Tessa's happy face clouded. "I didn't need to. Aunt Edith had a telegram; her daughter has been taken ill. She rushed away this afternoon; she won't be back till Monday."

"Oh, good luck! Then you had no trouble."

"It's odd," Tessa said doubtfully. "I don't understand why, but I'd rather it hadn't happened. I'd feel better if I'd had to dodge Aunt Edith."

"What an odd point of view!" Carol laughed lightly. "I should have thought you'd be glad. Unless the maids give you away, your aunt needn't know anything about it."

"Unless I tell her, when she comes back."

Carol looked at her in amusement. "You couldn't be such a little ass, surely!"

Tessa's cheeks flamed and she said no more, but felt she had been childish and silly.

Carol saw it and changed the subject. "I like your frock. Pretty colour!"

Tessa was herself again in a moment, the touch of discomfort thrust aside. "I love lemon yellow. It's the colour I've chosen for my May Queen train. My flowers will be lupins, and I'm having great spikes of them, in blue and rose and apricot, reaching out from the corners."

“On lemon yellow? That will suit you, with your dark hair and eyes. You’ll be a fine spot of colour!”

“The procession needs brightening up,” Tessa explained happily. “I’m going to do it. We’ve had a lavender Queen, who is very demure, and a lobelia Queen, who looks regal but sober; and a rosemary Queen, in quiet colours too. It’s time we had a vivid Queen.”

“You’ll look lovely as the vivid Queen,” Carol told her. “I was nearly Queen once. Did you know?”

Tessa turned to her eagerly. “No, what happened? I knew you’d been to our school. Why were you only ‘nearly Queen’?”

“A split vote. Half of them wanted me, but half didn’t.”

“Oh, hard lines! Weren’t you fearfully upset?”

“I was, at the time. But it might have been a nuisance. I certainly shouldn’t have wanted to keep on dressing up as Queen, year after year, as they do. It’s time those married people dropped out. Some of them are so old that their daughters are Queens. Absurd, I call it!”

“Oh, but we like them to come! We want to see them, and we like the long procession!”

“That’s all right. But it wouldn’t appeal to me.”

“Did they choose the other person as Queen?”

“That wouldn’t have been fair. I had as many votes as she did.”

“Then what did they do?” Tessa asked, enthralled by this early history of the Club.

“They turned us both down and chose the newest member, who had only joined that evening. It was mad, of course, and a fearful risk; she might have been too awful for words. But it worked out quite well.”

“Who was she? Which Queen? Oh, please tell me—Carol!”

“Not shy of me any longer? All right, I’ll tell you. She was Joy Shirley, and she was a jolly pretty kid, in those days. She’s Lady Quellyn now. I suppose you’ve seen her at the Hall?”

“Oh yes! I know her twins, Elizabeth and Margaret—but their name’s Marchwood, isn’t it?”

“She married twice; the twins are the first family. She got the crown I ought to have had.”

“It was hard lines on you,” said Tessa. “Tell me more about those days!”

“No, you tell me about meeting Mary Damayris and her fiancé. What is he like?” and Carol kept the conversation firmly away from her schooldays.

CHAPTER III

JANSY GIVES ADVICE

“Where’s Rosalind?” Tessa burst into the cloakroom on Monday morning and looked wildly round. “I saw the car from the Hall. I want Rosalind!”

“You can’t have her till this afternoon,” Jansy said. “She went to Kentisbury yesterday, to tell them about Saturday night; Aunt Ros couldn’t be there because of the new baby. So Rosalind went to tell her more than she could say by phone. What’s up, Tessa?”

“I want to talk to her. I think I’m in a fearful mess.”

“Don’t you know?” jeered somebody. “I usually know only too well!”

“What’s the matter, Tessa?” Jansy saw that the trouble was serious.

Tessa flung off her hat and coat and seized the ex-Queen by the arm. “Perhaps you’ll do. I must tell somebody; I feel horrible. You’re only a kid, but you have been Queen. It ought to count for something.”

“I’ll do anything I can,” Jansy said patiently. “If you’d only tell me what’s the matter, I’d know if I could help.”

“Look here, Jansy! I went to that show on Saturday night. I saw you and all the Abbey crowd, but you didn’t see me. We were three rows behind you, and we slipped out quickly.”

“Oh, Tessa! Did your aunt relent at the last minute? I am glad! Wasn’t it marvellous? But how did you get tickets? We heard they were all sold days before.”

“Aunt didn’t know. She doesn’t know yet. I went with Miss Carter; she’s a friend of Mother’s. I’ve known her for some time,” Tessa said defiantly.

Jansy was staring at her blankly. “But—how do you mean? Did you say your aunt——?”

“She had to go away for the week-end; somebody had been taken ill. She won’t be back till this afternoon.”

“And you went, without asking her?” Jansy said slowly.

“I met Miss Carter on the way home from school on Friday, and I told her how bad I was feeling. She had tickets, and she offered to take me. We went in her car; it was perfectly safe. There was nothing wrong in it. But——”

“Only that you cheated your aunt,” Jansy told her unhappily.

“I felt she’d been unfair,” Tessa urged. “Mother said I could go. I suppose I’ll have to tell her.”

“Who? Your mother? Or your aunt?”

“Both,” Tessa retorted. “I meant Aunt Edith. I’ve written to Mother, of course.”

“I wish you hadn’t done it,” Jansy said. “It wasn’t quite—oh well!”

“What were you going to say?” Tessa demanded.

“It doesn’t matter. You know, or you wouldn’t be so keen to tell Rosalind.”

Tessa gave her a quick look. “Not straight? Not good enough for a Queen?”

“I didn’t say so. Why did you tell me?” Jansy asked indignantly.

“Because there’s something more. You haven’t heard it all yet. As we were coming out, the most awful thing happened. We ran right into the Head! I never dreamt she’d be there. She knew how much I’d wanted to go, so she smiled, and was just frightfully sweet, and said how glad she was that my aunt had arranged for me to come, after all. I didn’t know where to look or what to say; then she disappeared into the crowd, and I couldn’t get near her again. Now I

feel I've cheated her as well as Aunt Edith. And *do* you think Rosalind will say I ought to go to Miss Raven and tell her I was there without leave?"

Jansy was gazing at her in horror. "Oh, Tessa, what frightfully bad luck! If she hadn't been there—well, I don't know. But when she spoke to you, and said that about your aunt, it's almost like telling her a lie, isn't it?"

"It's letting her believe what isn't true," Tessa admitted. "But I *didn't* tell her a lie!"

Jansy shook her head. "It will seem to her as if you had."

"I want to know what Rosalind thinks."

Jansy, overwrought and very much afraid of trouble for everybody, exploded suddenly. "Why do you want to put it on to her? Can't you decide for yourself? Why should she tell you what to do? It's jolly hard on Nanta Rose!"

"She's the Queen," Tessa muttered. "I'll do it, if she says I must."

"Well, I think it's mean! Make up your own mind! You won't like it, when you're Queen—*if* you're Queen——!"

"What do you mean?" Tessa exclaimed, a lurking fear, rigidly suppressed, leaping to the surface of her mind. "Why 'if'? I've been chosen by the Club!"

"I know, and I want you to be Queen. But I've a ghastly idea—oh, can't you see it for yourself?"

Tessa looked at her, wide-eyed and white. "You think the Club will say I'm not good enough to be Queen?"

"Not the Club. We all want you. But they might, if—oh, Tessa, go and tell the Head! Don't wait for Rosalind—go now! It will make all the difference with the Club!"

"I don't understand." Tessa stared at her.

"They may feel you were mad to do it, but they'll say—at least, you were honest and owned up," Jansy explained breathlessly. "I *know* that's how they'll feel! And suppose your aunt tells the Head, Tessa?"

Tessa gave her a horrified look. "She couldn't be such a rotter! But—yes, she could. She'll be wild, and she might do it. Thanks, Jansy! I'll go—now at once."

She raced away to the Head's study, her courage screwed up to top pitch.

Jansy gazed after her; then she went gloomily to her own classroom.

"What's wrong with our future Queen? I saw her just now, looking like nothing on earth," cried Phyl, Tessa's chum, meeting Jansy on her way.

"She'll tell you. I can't."

"Has she made an ass of herself again?" asked Sandra.

"I'm afraid perhaps she has." Jansy, very unhappy, wished for Nanta as fervently as Tessa had done.

In a corner of the tennis court, at break, Tessa told the story to Phyl. "And whether you'll ever be my maid-of-honour, is more than I can say, my dear," she finished.

"Tessa, you are an ass! Why did you do it?" Phyl cried.

"Tessa, what did the Head say?" Jansy interrupted the conversation. "Sorry to butt in, but you ought to tell me; you shoved the trouble on to me!"

"Yes, it's only fair." Tessa's face was full of foreboding. "The good Head was properly shocked; said I'd gone behind Aunt Edith and it wasn't decent—in other words, of course! Said she was glad I'd told her and not left her to find out for herself. *And* said she'd have to think it over and decide what to do about it."

“What did she mean by that?” Phyl demanded. “It’s nothing to do with school. She can’t give you lines or marks for what you did at the week-end!”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Jansy said sturdily. “If the Head saw any of us fooling about in the streets, being noisy, or larking with boys, she’d do something about it, however much out of school it was.”

“I’m afraid she means to do something,” Tessa said unhappily. “I wish I hadn’t been such an ass!”

“Didn’t she give you any hint?” Phyl asked anxiously.

Tessa kicked at the grass and stared at her feet. At last she faced Phyl and Jansy desperately.

“She said one thing. Said she didn’t feel I was trustworthy enough to be Queen. She’s going to talk to Rosalind.”

“Oh!” Phyl groaned. “But she couldn’t mean——”

“That’s what I’ve been afraid of,” Jansy wailed. “I’ve been dreading it all along. Oh, Tessa, why were you such an idiot?”

CHAPTER IV

NANTA HEARS THE NEWS

The story was all over the school by midday. Tessa made no secret of it, and finding that she was talking freely, Jansy answered questions among the younger girls as well as she could.

"Nanta Rose won't like that," Elizabeth Marchwood said gloomily. "For two pins the Head won't let Tessa be Queen."

"The Head can't interfere. It's the Hamlet Club's job to choose the Queen and we've chosen Tessa," her friend Diana argued.

"I think like Elizabeth does," Margaret-Twin said firmly. "The Head won't care about the Hamlet Club."

"You two have only got one voice between you," Diana scoffed.

"'Tisn't true!" Margaret shouted. "We fight like anything, if we want to! But I know the Head won't care what we think, and so does Lizbeth."

"I'm afraid she'll care so much that she won't want us to have a Queen who might let the Club down," Jansy said sombrely.

"Tessa wouldn't ever do it again. She wouldn't do it after she's Queen," Diana urged.

That was a very general view among the members of the Club. Tessa had been an idiot, but she had had a horrible shock and she would never do such a thing again. They were positive she would not fail, if she were Queen.

Jansy was not so sure. Tessa's reckless side had shown before and it might break out again. Was that how Miss Raven felt?

"Besides," Ann and Jennifer, friends of Diana and the twins, spoke together, "it was really that other person's fault. She oughtn't to have taken Tessa to town. She knew there'd be a row."

"She's a snake and a serpent," Margaret said bitterly. "She tempted Tessa, and look what's happened!"

"And Tessa was soft," Elizabeth groaned. "It's an awful pity."

On that everyone was agreed, and on another point also. The Queen would be distressed when she heard the story. Her return was awaited anxiously by everybody, from Tessa down to Rosemary Marchwood and her friend Hermione Rose.

Nanta was quietly happy as the Kentisbury car brought her back for afternoon classes. Her reign had been peaceful and would, she felt, be looked back upon with pleasure by the school. She knew she would receive a thick crown of forget-me-nots when she gave place to Tessa on May-Day, a sign of her popularity with the Club. She had hardly a month more of school, but she would come back often, for coronations, and would wear her shining lavender train to welcome new Queens. Some day she hoped to see the Abbey twins crowned, and later on perhaps Rosemary and Hermione also.

She was looking forward to the summer, however. The sister who had mothered her had a beautiful home in the country and a fascinating baby girl of a year old. Nanta was to live with them and see as much as she wanted of Nancy Rose, her god-daughter. Virginia's husband was attending lectures on agriculture in Bristol and was often away for a whole day; Virginia, hoping for a son and heir in the autumn, would spend a quiet summer, and she definitely wanted Nanta's company. It was all arranged very happily.

The car set the Queen down at the school gate and she went in, carrying her violin. On every side girls were lying in wait. They swooped down on her in an excited crowd. Nanta thrust her violin into Margaret Marchwood's hands. "Hold that for me! Be careful! What *is* the matter with you all?"

"Well, listen! We want to tell you! The most awful thing——"

"I can't listen to you all at once! Oh—Jansy! What is this row about?"

The crowd made way for the ex-Queen, who thrust them aside ruthlessly. "Tessa's in a fearful mess," she said bluntly. "We don't know what's going to happen."

Nanta looked down at her. "What is it? Oh, not Tessa!" she wailed.

"She went to the show on Saturday night without leave from her aunt, and the Head saw her there. Tessa's been to her to own up."

Nanta took her arm and led her out of the crowd. "Don't come, all you lot. Jansy will tell me. I can't say anything till I know more. I simply don't understand. Take care of my fiddle, Margaret-Twin! Now, Jan! Tell me quickly!"

In a corner of the playground Jansy hurriedly gave the details. "Tessa's hanging about, wanting to speak to you. But she said she'd let us tell you the worst."

"Everybody knows, then?"

"Oh yes! She isn't making any secret of it. Nanta Rose, what do you think the Head will do?" Jansy asked piteously.

They looked at one another, Jansy hopeful of comfort from someone so much older.

"I can't imagine," Nanta said. "But she'll do something."

"She won't say Tessa mustn't be Queen, will she?" Jansy voiced her great fear. "It would make dreadful trouble. The girls have been talking about it. They say the Head can't interfere with the Club."

"I'm afraid the Head will feel she can," Nanta said unhappily. "She'll say she must do what is best for the school. An untrustworthy Queen wouldn't be good for either the school or the Club. I don't say Tessa's untrustworthy; she doesn't think, that's all. But it's what the Head will say."

"There'll be a fearful row, if she butts in and takes away the Queen we've chosen, Nanta Rose."

"Then it will be up to you and me to make the Club see sense!" Nanta spoke without hesitation. "We're Queens. We have to stand by the Head. You will, won't you, Jan?"

"I'll stand by you through thick and thin," Jansy vowed. "But I'm not looking forward to it."

"That's putting it very mildly! I'm terrified of what's coming," Nanta said gloomily. "We're partly to blame, I'm afraid. We chose too soon; or we told Tessa too soon. A Queen has never been chosen in January before; we ought to have waited. But we were so sure, and we wanted Tessa so much. There's the bell! I'll speak to Tessa as I go in."

Tessa was waiting for her near the door. "Rosalind, I'm so fearfully sorry! I've been an awful idiot. Do you loathe me too utterly?"

"Not a bit, but you were an ass, Tessa. I'm sorry, too, but I know how you felt. I'm glad you saw the show—if only you had gone in a different way."

"I know. I can't be altogether sorry, because it was so marvellous. That wonderful welcome, when Mary Damayris first came in! I'm glad I didn't miss that. No other performance will be quite the same. Was it so very awful of me to go with Miss Carter?" Tessa asked wistfully. "You know how keen I was."

“It was awful of Miss Carter to ask you. She understood, didn’t she?”

“Oh yes! She knew all about it. She said Aunt Edith was being brutal. We went in her car; we were quite safe,” Tessa urged.

“I wish you’d stood out against her, but I see how difficult it was for you,” Nanta said gravely. “I blame Miss Carter quite as much as you. But I don’t know what the Head is going to say. You’ve seen her, Jansy said?”

“Oh yes! I felt I was cheating her by letting her think I’d gone in a proper way, so I rushed off and told her.”

“I’m glad you did. You didn’t go quite in a proper way, did you?”

“No, it was sneaky,” Tessa burst out. “If Aunt Edith had been at home I’d have had to creep out of the house. Oh, I cheated, of course; there’s no getting away from it.”

“I can’t tell you not to feel bad about it,” Nanta said soberly. “I’m terribly sorry you did it. But I know how you were feeling and how that person got round you. I don’t suppose I can do much to help, but if there’s anything I can do I’ll do it. I’ll stand by you, and so will Jansy and the Club.”

“You’re an angel!” Tessa said fervently, as they went in together. “I’ve been afraid of what you’d say. I don’t feel quite so bad now.”

“I feel bad, though,” Nanta said to herself, as she went to the cloakroom to change her shoes and hang up her coat.

Her French class suffered that afternoon, for her thoughts were busy. Her violin lesson, which followed, was not really a lesson at all, for she played quite as well as her teacher. But it was good practice and they played together and discussed the music, and both felt benefit from the lessons. To-day, however, Nanta could not concentrate, and she begged to be excused the last few minutes, saying she wanted to see the Head.

“It’s all I can do. It may be no use, but I can try,” she thought, as she put away her fiddle. “Perhaps she’ll tell me what she’s going to do. At least I can put in a word for Tessa.”

And feeling very anxious she went to the Head’s study. As the reigning Queen she was a privileged person and she was admitted at once.

“Come in, my dear. I was just wondering if I should send for you,” said Miss Raven.

CHAPTER V

A HAMLET CLUB JOB

“You have heard what has happened?” Miss Raven looked at the tall girl who stood beside her desk. “Sit down, my dear. Perhaps you can help me to think this out.”

“Miss Raven, I am so sorry about it!” and Nanta broke into eager pleading for Tessa, urging her desperate longing to see the show and not to feel left out, and her sudden yielding to temptation. “At the last moment, when she had given up hope, it was really very hard to be offered what she wanted so much! She’d have had to be very firm and brave to refuse.”

“Yes, yes, I see that. But is she fit for the great responsibility you girls are giving her next term? That is what is troubling me.” The Head went straight to the point.

“I’m sure Tessa will be a good Queen. She’ll be careful what she does when she’s Queen,” Nanta pleaded.

“I don’t feel at all sure of it. Tessa has shown herself weak in this matter. She may allow herself to be tempted again.”

“She was honest about it. She came and owned up,” Nanta urged.

“Yes, I am glad she did. If she had tried to conceal the truth I should have had no doubts on the matter. I shall have to think it over carefully. Come to me again to-morrow afternoon; I may have more to say then. And don’t look so unhappy, my dear! The Club has plenty of time before May-Day to choose another Queen.”

“Oh, but they want Tessa! We couldn’t turn her down now!” Nanta cried. “Oh, please, Miss Raven! It would break Tessa’s heart! Miss Lane is making her Queen’s train; it’s half finished, I know. And everyone knows she has been chosen. It would be dreadful to have to explain.”

The Head looked thoughtful. Unconsciously Nanta had used an argument which definitely appealed to her. It was only Miss Raven’s second year as Head; she did not want school troubles known throughout the town.

“I agree with you. It would be most unpleasant. But the good of the school must come first,” she said, and dismissed the very unhappy Queen.

“Tell us, Nanta Rose!” Jansy and the twins pleaded, as the car set out for home.

“There’s nothing to say. The Head’s thinking it over, and I’m to go to her again to-morrow afternoon. She wants the best for the school. But she isn’t sure that Tessa ought to be Queen.”

There was a stunned silence. It was broken by a shrill outcry from Margaret. “There’ll be a jolly old row! That won’t be good for the school!”

“She hasn’t any right to butt in! It’s Hamlet Club business,” Elizabeth asserted.

Jansy looked unhappily at Nanta. “It’s no use frowning, Nanta Rose. It’s not only these two. That’s how all the girls are talking. I’ve heard lots of them say it.”

“Then we’re in for trouble,” Nanta said heavily. “Did you squash them?”

“I tried, but it sounded rather feeble,” Jansy admitted. “It’s how I feel myself, you see. This is a Hamlet Club job. That’s what the girls say.”

“But the Club is part of the school; a very important part. And you and I have tried to make it lead the school. We can’t possibly go against what the Head decides.”

“We’ve got to stick to the Club,” Elizabeth urged.

“Couldn’t you tell the Head what’s going to happen, if she goes on like this?” Margaret asked darkly.

“Threaten the Head? Oh, Margaret-Twin, we couldn’t do that!” Nanta laughed in spite of her distress.

“No, but you could warn her,” Elizabeth said. “Tell her how bad we feel, and let her guess the rest. That would be tactful!”

“There’ll be a rebellion,” Margaret began.

“Then you’ll have to reckon with Jansy and me.”

“Do you mean you’d side with the Head against the Club? But you’re the Queen!” Elizabeth gazed at her in horror.

“So I must do what’s best for the Club.”

“A rebellion against the Head could never be best, no matter how bad we feel,” Jansy explained.

“I shall ask Mother what she thinks,” Margaret said. “She was Queen once.”

“We can tell her, can’t we?” Elizabeth asked anxiously. “It doesn’t have to be a secret?”

“It can’t be a secret,” Jansy said. “We’ll have to tell people. They know Tessa’s been chosen.”

“It can’t be a secret,” Nanta agreed. “The old Queens were at the party when we told Tessa. They’ll have to know.”

“Then we can tell Mother,” the twins spoke together.

“And Nanta Rose and I will talk to Rachel,” said Jansy. “Here’s the Abbey—oh, look! There’s Aunty Jen, waiting for us. There’s your mother, Rosemary and Mike!”

“We’ve seen her,” Mike shouted. “Hi, Mother! Come in the car with us!”

“No, you’re coming out of the car with me.” Tall curly-haired Jen Marchwood, as fair as Michael and a complete contrast to dark little Rosemary, had stopped the car at the Abbey gate. “Hop out, all of you! Twins, your mother has asked us three to tea, so you can look after Rosemary and Mike.”

“We’ll have tea with them and the boys and Maidie-Rose,” said Elizabeth, referring to her small half-brothers and the baby girl who had been born in America almost a year before.

“But we want to hear what Mother says about the row,” Margaret cried.

“We’ll do both,” Elizabeth said firmly.

“Row? What’s the matter? What is she talking about, Lavender?” Jen addressed Nanta by her Queen’s name. “Who is in a row?”

“Everybody. The whole Hamlet Club. We’re in a frightful mess, Lady Jen.”

“Then we must certainly hear about it! We wanted your report on Rosamund and the new baby, but perhaps there’s something more urgent.” Jen looked at the Queen keenly. “You’re worried, dear. This won’t do! We can’t have our Fiddler upset.”

“It’s much more urgent,” Nanta agreed. “And I am worried. We want to know what you think.”

“We want to tell you old Queens about it,” said Jansy.

“You might say ‘former Queens’. We’re not so very old,” Jen laughed. “As former Queens we certainly want to know when the Club is in trouble.”

“Well, it is now,” Elizabeth told her.

“It’s in a ghastly mess,” said Margaret. “We’ll tell you and Mother both at the same time.”

“Yes, don’t say any more till we find your mother,” Jen agreed.

The car drove on to the Manor, and the schoolgirls and Jen went through the ancient gate-house and up the drive between flower-beds thick with golden and violet crocus and bushes of sweet-briar.

“Can you still see this as it used to be, when it was just a meadow?” Jen asked, hoping to change the current of Nanta’s troubled thoughts.

“Not very clearly, though I sometimes try.” Nanta gave her a quick smile. “I can’t banish the garden. I can see only flowers.”

“We knew it as a meadow for twenty years,” Jen said. “But the garden is beautiful. Mary Damayris did a good spot of work when she made it; her years away from the theatre weren’t wasted. She has left us the garden as a reminder of those days, and Benedicta is keeping it as beautifully as she did.” And she waved to a girl in khaki smock and breeches, with lint-white hair, who was digging in a far corner.

She waved in reply, but went on with her work, and Jen and the girls went to the inner gate. It was opened for them by the Abbey Guardian, Rachel, the dark-haired sister of the ballet-dancer, who wore a white gown like a monk’s robe as a sign of her position.

“All well?” she smiled, as she held the heavy gate open for the small children.

“No, very ill,” Margaret retorted. “The Queen’s coming to talk to you after tea.”

Rachel looked at Nanta. “What’s the matter?”

“Bad trouble at school, Rachel. May I tell you about it later?”

“Oh, please do! I’m very sorry.”

Queen Lavender’s eyes rested on the quiet garth and the old grey buildings. “It helps, just to come back to this peaceful place. I like to feel we have it behind us. I’m glad we aren’t boarders at school.”

“We’d never get away from the mess,” Jansy added. “I know how you feel, Nanta Rose. We can’t forget the row, but we are out of it once we’re back in the Abbey.”

“It should help you to see things more clearly and put the row in its proper place,” Rachel said. She looked at Jen. “Do you know what it’s all about?”

“I do not, and I’m bursting with curiosity,” Jen said solemnly. “All these hints about rows and messes are so tantalising! Come and tell Joy and me all about it, Jansy and Nanta!”

“Lob and Lavender,” said Jansy. “It’s because we’re Queens that we’re so worried.”

“Then the old Queens must try to help,” Jen told her.

CHAPTER VI

QUEENS IN COUNCIL

In the big entrance-hall, with its family portraits and stained-glass windows throwing coloured patterns on the polished floor as the sunset light streamed in, Joy, Lady Quellyn, and Jen, Lady Marchwood, listened to the story told as a duet by Nanta and Jansy round the tea-table. On promise of hearing their mother's verdict later, Elizabeth and Margaret had accepted their duties as hostesses and were upstairs in the nursery, entertaining Rosemary and Mike and playing with David and Richard, who were five and four years old, and Baby Rose, or Maidie-Rose, as they insisted on calling her.

"Just Rose isn't important enough. It's such a little name, when I'm Elizabeth and Twin's Margaret," Elizabeth had argued, when their mother tried to change her young daughter's name from Baby to Rose. "As her first name's Maidlin, for Auntie Maid, we're going to call her Maidie-Rose." And "Maidie-Rose" had been adopted by most of the clan, in spite of Joy's preference for the simpler name.

"You are in a mess, sure enough," Jen groaned, when she understood the situation. "And I don't see how to help. It rests with the Head, and we can't go and plead with her. If it had still been dear old Mackums—I mean Miss Macey! You didn't know her, Nanta—we might have done something."

"Carter?" said Joy thoughtfully. "Could that be Carry Carter, who was my maid-of-honour? You remember the fuss with Carry, Jen? No, of course you won't; it was before your time. Queer to think there were days when we didn't know Jenny-Wren!"

"I thought we'd always known her." Jansy grinned.

"I remember hearing the story when I was a quite new kid of thirteen," Jen said. "She let you down in some way, didn't she?"

"She read a private note-book which I'd been silly enough to leave lying about, and used what she read to make trouble."

"Oh, the beast!" Jansy cried. "It sounds like the same person. But Tessa said 'Carol Carter'."

"You can't blame her for making the best of her name," Joy laughed. "I'd turn into Carol myself if I were unlucky enough to be called Caroline. But she was Carry at school. I saw her for a second in the crowd at the theatre, but I didn't see Tessa. Of course it's Carry Carter, turned up again and trying to do a bad turn to the Club because, all those years ago, she wasn't chosen Queen!"

"She'd have been a jolly bad one," Jen said. "How have you managed to avoid her all these years?"

"She got herself sent to boarding-school. She'd have liked to be Queen, but when Joan was chosen after me, and Muriel after Joan, Carry gave up hope and went off to school in London. She tried hard to be a friend to me when she came back, grown-up and smart." Joy smiled. "She wanted to visit here and be a pal. She always was a little snob, and she liked the look of the Hall! But I didn't want her and I never asked her here. She didn't like being ignored, so she kept out of my way and never came to crownings or anything at school. I haven't seen her for years. She's away from home a great deal, I believe."

“Could we do anything about this mess?” Jen began. “Could you write to Miss Raven and say you believe Miss Carter was trying to pay off a grudge against the Club, by getting the future Queen into trouble?”

“I could, but it wouldn’t be any use. Miss Raven would merely say Tessa had shown she had no backbone and she was too weak to be Queen.”

“She was very badly tempted. It was hard on her,” said a voice from the tea-table.

Joy’s friend and secretary, Mary Devine, had been attending to the tea-pot. The four Queens turned to her eagerly, Jen the first to get out her question.

“What do you think about it, Mary-Dorothy? Tell us what to do!”

“I don’t see that you can do anything. I’m very sorry for Tessa, but she has made a bad mistake. You might plead for her and for the Club—all you former Queens. Joan and Rosamund and Maidlin would be glad to help. It will be very hard on the Club if there’s any interference with the coronation, after all these years.”

“Ghastly! The whole town would know,” Jen agreed.

“Beatrice and Grace ought not to be left out of this,” Mary said, speaking of the two nurses in charge of the children upstairs. “They are former Queens; in any Hamlet Club business they should have their share. Shall I send them down? I’ll stay with the babes.”

“Mary-Dorothy, how kind you are!” Joy exclaimed. “Yes, please fetch the girls. But we want your advice too.”

“I can only suggest a petition to the Head, signed by all the former Queens you can find. Maidlin has Queen Honesty in her nursery, and Rosamund has Hyacinth and Lilac. You could have quite a list of signatures.”

“It won’t do any good,” Joy said. “But we can try.”

“It would show Miss Raven how strongly we feel,” Jen began.

Mary paused on her way to the door. “If she thinks you’re trying to interfere, it may do more harm than good. Miss Raven is the one to decide. You mustn’t let her feel you are trying to force her hand.”

“She’d turn against our ideas at once,” Jen admitted, as Mary went upstairs. “You know her better than we do, Nanta and Jansy. How would she react to a petition from the early Queens? She doesn’t really know us.”

“She might be mad and say you were trying to butt in,” Jansy said gloomily.

“It would have to be put to her very carefully,” Joy said. “And while we are preparing our petition she may have made up her mind. If she has once given her verdict she isn’t likely to change for anything we can say.”

“Not if she’s a Head worth having,” Jen assented, with gloom equal to Jansy’s.

“She won’t change her mind,” said Nanta.

The Striped Queen, Beatrice, and Grace, the Garden Queen, came racing down to join the conference, as soon as they heard the Club was in trouble. But neither could make any useful suggestion. Beatrice remembered Carry Carter and asserted that it was just what might have been expected of her, but Gracie had never known her. She was much younger, being the seventeenth Queen, while Queen Bee had been the eighth.

Jen was moved to protest. “I don’t know Carry and I don’t like what I’ve heard of her, but she may have meant this kindly. We’ve no proof that she was trying to hurt the Club. She knew Tessa and she saw how disappointed the girl was. She tried to help. That’s all.”

“Would you have helped in that way?” Joy demanded.

“Of course not. I hope I know what’s decent! But from what you say of Carry Carter, she evidently wasn’t particularly honourable even when she was at school.”

“That’s putting it very mildly,” Joy said grimly.

“Give the woman a chance. She may have tried to be kind, and she seems to have no principles,” said Jen.

Nanta looked up. “The Head will still say Tessa ought not to have gone.”

“That’s what we’re all afraid of,” Joy agreed. “No matter how much Carry Carter may have been to blame, the real trouble is that Tessa didn’t refuse.”

“In fact, Tessa’s principles weren’t any stronger than Carry’s,” Gracie Gray remarked. “If the new Head says she’s too weak to be Queen, you can’t blame her.”

“But Tessa’s nice! You don’t know her,” Jansy wailed. “We all like her. We want her for Queen!”

“We asked her too soon,” Nanta said heavily. “It was our mistake. It was partly because she’s the new Queen that Tessa cared so much. She felt important and excited; we’ve all known that; and she couldn’t bear to be left out. It’s partly our fault.”

“Perhaps you could remind Miss Raven of that, when you see her to-morrow,” Jen suggested.

Nanta sighed. “I’ll try. And I think we might send a petition, signed by all the Queens we can get hold of.”

“We can ask Clover and Wild Rose,” Joy said. “And of course the President and the first Queen. We can find nearly everybody. But it will take a few days. I’m afraid we’ll be too late. The Head will have to decide.”

“I’d like to go and talk to Rachel in the Abbey,” Nanta said wearily. “I know she can’t do anything, but we’ll have to tell her; she knows something is wrong. It helps to talk things over with her.”

“This is hard on you, Lavender,” Jen said gently. “You’ve had such a happy reign.”

Nanta’s lips pinched. “I thought something like that, in the car coming back this afternoon. I felt so good about school; everything seemed to have gone so well. There’s less than a month left now.”

“And Tessa has spoiled everything! It is really very hard,” Jen exclaimed.

“It isn’t Nanta Rose’s fault!” Jansy cried.

“No, but it’s going to fall on her; seeing the Head, and perhaps arguing with the Club,” said Joy, as Nanta went out. “You must back her up, Jansy. We know she’ll accept whatever the Head decides; she has no choice. But she may find herself up against the Club, if they take Tessa’s side, as of course they will. Don’t let Nanta feel she’s alone against the world!”

“I won’t. I’ll stand by her,” Jansy said fervently. “Can’t I go to the Abbey too? I want to hear what Rachel says.”

“Go presently,” Jen advised. “Let Nanta have a few minutes with Rachel first.”

CHAPTER VII

THE HEAD DECIDES

It was closing time in the Abbey. Rachel, seeing Queen Lavender at the door, took off her white gown and put away the manuscript on which she had been working.

“Come along! I’ll light the fire; I don’t need it till the evening. Have you had tea?”

“Yes, thanks, all I want.” Nanta looked round the little parlour, inside the outer walls of the Abbey, with its crimson lamp, gray and blue pictures of the Lake District, and magnificent daffodils and tulips in green jars on the table and bookcases. “Are these some of Mary Damayris’s flowers?”

Rachel, in a blue dress, knelt to coax the fire into life. She smiled up at the Queen. “Yes, aren’t they lovely? She brought them home on Saturday night because they were so beautiful, but she couldn’t take them back to town with her, so I’m getting the benefit. The tulips came from Kentisbury and the daffodils from the Manor. There! That will be all right. Now what has happened at school?”

She drew up a low chair and listened intently while Nanta told her story.

“Oh, poor Tessa! One can understand it, of course. And poor Lavender! What a blow, when you hoped for so much from Tessa!”

“I knew you’d understand,” Nanta said gratefully. “You can’t do anything; but it helps to feel you care. You see how dreadful it is, don’t you? Jansy and I must do what the Head wants; Queens can’t lead rebellions! Margaret is sure there will be what she calls a rebellion. But it will be very difficult, if we can’t make the Club see it.”

“I sympathise most deeply,” Rachel said. “But you must uphold the Head. Perhaps the girls will be reasonable.”

“But the crowning in May, Rachel! I *know* the Club won’t choose another Queen. They’ll stick to Tessa, now that she knows we want her.”

“Is that the Head’s suggestion? No, I don’t suppose they’ll choose anyone else. But it would be dreadful to have no Queen.”

“I can’t see any way out,” Nanta said drearily.

“There will be a way; there always is,” Rachel told her bracingly. “I don’t say it will be easy, and I can’t guess what it will be, but there will be one way, at least, and you’ll have to go ahead and see what you can make of it. Jansy will back you up.”

“Oh yes! But she’s only fifteen. It’s all the help in the world to have people like you and Mary-Dorothy, and Lady Jen and Lady Joy, at home to talk to. We feel we have you behind us. If we were boarders, alone at school, we couldn’t carry on. Here comes Jansy!”

“Instead of listening while you tell us a school story, we’ve brought the story to you, Rachel,” Jansy proclaimed, squatting on the hearthrug. “Have you talked sense to Nanta Rose? Talk to me too!”

“I’m very sorry about one thing,” Rachel said soberly. “I’m terribly upset that this has happened because of Damaris. She’ll be sorry too.”

“It isn’t her fault.” Jansy and Nanta spoke together.

“No, but she’ll be sorry,” Rachel said again. “I’m ringing her up later, to hear how to-night’s show went, but I shan’t tell her your story till to-morrow. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“No, not after her show. Saturday night was marvellous. Really, I don’t blame Tessa,” Jansy remarked. “She just couldn’t bear to miss it when she was given the chance to go. It was that woman’s fault. I’m going to tell Tessa what Aunt Joy says about her. Then Tessa will loathe her for ever.”

“Tessa won’t trust her again,” Nanta said. “I’m sure she’s had enough of Miss Carol Carter.”

“Carry, or Caroline.” And Jansy looked up at Rachel and repeated the story Joy had told.

Rachel pursed her lips. “Not a good friend for Tessa. What a pity they met that afternoon!”

Nanta rose to go home. “You’ll tell Mary Damayris how much we loved her dancing, won’t you? When is she to be married? Is it fixed?”

“In June. She and Brian have decided definitely now. She wants the twins and Jansy to be bridesmaids.”

“Oh, good! How nice of her! I shall be very willing to oblige her,” Jansy said formally.

“Come home and do your prep. To-morrow’s going to be difficult enough without unprepared work,” Nanta warned her.

“I can’t think about prep. I’m too worried,” Jansy retorted.

That was the usual attitude in the Hamlet Club next day. Work was badly prepared or not done at all. Thoughts were wandering, and the girls were excited, or gloomy, or anxious, according to their temperaments.

“Everything’s horrid,” Hermione Manley confided to her friend, Rosemary Marchwood, and other ten-year-olds.

“It’s this Hamlet Club bother,” Rosemary agreed. “They don’t know what’s going to happen. The twins can’t talk about anything else, and Jansy and Queen Lavender don’t say a word; they’re too upset. It was horrid in the car this morning.”

Jansy sought Tessa as soon as she reached school, and found her coming to look for Nanta, her face white and set.

“Lavender, I’m sorry. I must say it again. It’s all my fault and I feel frightful. Shall I resign from being Queen? I think it would just about kill me, but I’ll do it, if you say I must.”

“No, don’t do that,” Nanta said quickly. “We do really want you; we know you’ll never do anything like this again.”

“Rather not!” Tessa said, with emphasis.

“We want to see you through. You’re our Queen, and we’re not going back on you. The Club wouldn’t like it, if they lost you now.”

“It wasn’t all your fault,” Jansy cried. “That Miss Carter has been a sneak and a rotter all her life. You’ll never like her again when you hear what she did once.”

Tessa listened, frowning. “She didn’t say anything about that to me. She told me she had nearly been Queen.”

“She wouldn’t tell you it all, of course. *Will* you like her again, Tessa?”

“No,” Tessa said curtly. “You needn’t have told me. I was an ass to go with her, but she shouldn’t have asked me. I don’t trust her now. Aunt Edith’s been rubbing it in.”

“Has your aunt come back?” Nanta asked.

“Oh yes! There’s the father and mother of a row! I told her; I didn’t want the maids to give me away or Miss Raven to write to her. We had a scene, and we’ll have more yet. She swears she’ll write to the Head and say I’m not fit to be Queen; I said the Head knew that already. And she’s writing to Mother. I was glad I could say I’d written on Sunday.”

“At least you haven’t tried to hush it up,” Jansy said.

“What do they say at the Abbey?” Tessa looked at Nanta. “You told them, I suppose?”

“We couldn’t help it. They’re Queens of the Club; they had to know. They’re terribly sorry. But if they were running the school I think they would give you another chance. They’re very understanding and kind.”

Tessa nodded and turned away hurriedly. Any touch of sympathy would break her down to-day, though she could meet blame or scorn with defiance.

From every class reports went to the Head of inattention and carelessness. Miss Verity could not keep the girls to their French; Miss Honor complained of their maths; Miss Raven herself had difficulty with their literature; the cookery mistress was really annoyed with her senior students.

“They say they’re worried,” said Miss Verity. “The whole school seems to be worried.”

“But the Hamlet girls are the most upset,” said Miss Honor, who had been the Wild Rose Queen in her schooldays. “We shan’t get good work out of them till this affair is settled.”

“I can do nothing with Tessa and Rosalind and the rest,” the cookery mistress added.

“Janice Raymond made a complete mess of her French translation, and she can do it well enough, when she likes,” Miss Verity remarked.

The Head knew that something must be done. Early in the afternoon she sent for Nanta.

“Is there any chance of the Hamlet girls choosing another Queen?” she asked abruptly. “I can’t think Tessa is fit for the position at present.”

Nanta faced her bravely. “They won’t do it, Miss Raven. I’ve heard them talking. They’ve chosen Tessa, and they mean to stick to her.”

“I can’t force them to choose someone else,” the Head said. “You are making it very difficult for me. I can’t accept Tessa as a trustworthy Queen, but I don’t want to break the school tradition of the May-Day crowning. If they would choose somebody else for this year, and if Tessa proved herself to be trusted, by next year I might be able to allow her to be Queen.”

“Miss Raven, if you’d give her another chance!” Nanta pleaded. “She’ll never do such a thing again! She has had a dreadful shock; she’ll be steady enough now. If she hadn’t met that—that friend, this wouldn’t have happened. It wasn’t her own idea. She was tempted by that person. I know she was weak and silly, but that was all.”

“But would a weak and silly Queen be good for the Hamlet Club?”

“I feel the Club is partly to blame.” Nanta spoke with great earnestness, and with courage too. “Perhaps I was more to blame than anyone. We chose Tessa too soon. I urged the rest to do it. We oughtn’t to have told her in January; it has never been done before. It was partly her excitement and her important feeling about being Queen that made her go; she couldn’t bear to be left out. We were to blame, Miss Raven. We were in too much of a hurry. But there seemed to be no one else—and there’s no one else now. I can’t ask the girls to choose again, for they’ll just say ‘Who is there?’ and I haven’t anybody to suggest. Couldn’t you let Tessa try?”

“She might let you down and that would be disastrous for the Club and for the school,” Miss Raven said gravely.

“She wouldn’t do that. She’d feel responsible, if she was Queen.”

“And yet, being Queen-elect, she did this, my dear.”

In despair Nanta stood silent.

The Head looked at her thoughtfully. As Queen, Nanta knew the temper of the girls even better than she and her mistresses did. She guessed fairly well what their attitude must be,

from the Queen's downcast face.

"Have you had a meeting of the Club over this business?" she asked.

"No, Miss Raven. Not a real meeting."

"Only informal gossip. Call a meeting, then—for this afternoon, if you like—and tell the Club I wish them to choose another Queen. Point out that it will be a great pity if there can be no crowning in May."

Nanta looked at her in mute despair, but made no comment.

"You think it will be no use? That it is a waste of time?"

"Yes, Miss Raven."

"All the same, I would like you to try."

"Very well, Miss Raven."

"Some new idea may come out of your meeting. Well, what are you thinking, my dear?"

"Must I say, Miss Raven?"

"Certainly. Please tell me what you think."

"I don't believe it will be a helpful idea," Nanta said unhappily. "I think it's very likely there will be ideas, several of them, but they won't be ideas that will make things any better. I'd rather not give the girls the chance to put them into words."

"I see." The Head looked at her thoughtfully. "You have done your best, anyway. I won't blame you for what happens."

In complete despair Nanta went to find her maid-of-honour, Margaret-Twin, and sent her round to each classroom with notices of a meeting to be held after school.

"We must get it over," she said to herself. "None of us would sleep to-night if it were put off till to-morrow; I know I shouldn't."

She went to Tessa and begged her not to come to the meeting. "I'll tell the Club you have offered to resign. You can't do any more. I'll ring you up to-night and tell you what happens. It would only make you feel bad to be there."

Tessa turned a scared face to her. "She won't have me for Queen?"

"She wants us to find somebody else. But the Club won't do it. That's the trouble, Tessa. They're going to defy the Head. I don't know what she'll do."

"Gosh!" said Tessa. "I say, Lavender, I'm not worth it. Let me back out! Then it would all blow over. We can't have a complete school row over me!"

"I'll tell the girls you've offered," Nanta said again. "But don't come and say it yourself. That would make us all feel awful. We don't want the kids in tears."

"It might be myself in tears," Tessa said grimly. "Perhaps I'd better not. But tell the Club I don't want a revolt in the school over this."

"Right! I will," Nanta promised. "I said all I could to the Head, you know."

"You've been jolly decent about it," Tessa said hurriedly, and fled.

CHAPTER VIII

STANDING BY TESSA

The library was in an uproar. The Hamlet Club had come to hear the Head's decision; their Queen had given it briefly, without comment.

"She won't have Tessa. We're to choose someone else. She doesn't want us to give up the coronation."

A hubbub broke out. Nanta threw herself back in a big chair and waited.

"There isn't anybody else! She can't make us have a Queen we don't want!"

"She has no right to butt in on our affairs! No Head has ever interfered with the Hamlet Club! It's our business who is Queen!"

"She can't have a coronation without a Queen. I say, everybody, she'll want to have it!" There was a shout of triumph from Elizabeth Marchwood. She sprang on to a chair and managed to make herself heard. "We've had crownings for years and years and years. If there isn't one people will talk, and they'll say there must be something wrong in the school!"

"Miss Raven doesn't want them to think that," Margaret added in delight. "If we won't choose anybody else, she'll have to put up with Tessa."

There was a shout of agreement from the younger members, but the elders looked grave.

"Serves her right, if she finds herself in a hole," Margaret added, taking advantage of the attention Elizabeth had won. "Interfering with the Hamlet Club! It's like her cheek!"

"I say, Lavender, can't you stop this?" asked Sandra, a senior, uneasily.

Nanta was already on her feet. "Margaret! I'm ashamed of you! How dare you speak of the Head like that!"

"But it's true," cried Jennifer and Ann together. "No Head butts in on Hamlet Club business! *We* choose the Queen!"

"Girls!" Nanta ignored the juniors. "I ought to tell you that Tessa has offered to resign her place as chosen Queen, rather than have trouble in the school."

"But we want her! We've chosen her and we're going to stand by her," came the quick response from every corner of the room.

"And do you think it will be comfortable, if we insist on having a Queen whom the Head has refused?"

"That's her look-out," Elizabeth said instantly. "If she doesn't like the Queen we choose, she can—she'll have to put up with it, that's all."

"It's her own fault," Margaret shouted.

"You two are going to have a jolly time in the car going home," Jansy observed.

This possibility had not occurred to the twins. While the uproar broke out again, Elizabeth asked anxiously, "Are you going to side with the Head against the Club, you and Nanta?"

"Jansy, you couldn't be so silly!" Margaret almost wept. "Don't you want to stand by Tessa, you two?"

"Come here, Margaret-Twin," said Nanta, ignoring the wild talk that was going on all around.

"What for?" Margaret demanded truculently.

"Only that I want to speak to you. I can't shout against this din."

"You come too, Betty-Twin," Margaret said piteously.

Elizabeth climbed down from her chair and put her arm round the younger twin. "Come and see what Lavender wants, Peggy."

"You're being very unkind to Jansy and me," Nanta said quietly. "We want Tessa as much as you do, but being Queens we can't go against the Head. Perhaps some day you'll be Queen yourself; you never know! Then you'll find how difficult girls can make things for you."

Margaret gazed at her. "I didn't mean to make it hard for you and Jansy."

"Sorry!" Elizabeth wailed. "We're very sorry! But we do want Tessa and we don't like the Head messing up Hamlet Club business! She does want us to have a crowning, doesn't she?"

"Yes, I think she does."

"Then she ought to let us crown who we want to."

"What dreadful grammar, Elizabeth-Twin!"

"Who cares about grammar? And who could be Queen, if Tessa isn't?"

"That's what I can't tell you," Nanta admitted.

"There isn't anybody," said Margaret stubbornly.

"I rather agree with Margaret," Sandra remarked. "As no one else seems in the least suitable, we might as well have Tessa."

Nanta, looking white and tired, suddenly rang a small bell which she had brought from a classroom. Silence fell, as the girls turned to her in astonishment.

"Sorry to startle you, but we aren't getting anywhere, and it's late. Girls, let me speak for a moment. I must take some message to the Head from this meeting. We still want Tessa as Queen and we can't think of anyone else. Is that right?"

"Correct on both points," said Jansy promptly.

"We'd rather go without a coronation next May. Is that right too?"

"Heaps rather!" There was a defiant shout.

"I don't know," Sandra admitted. "It will be awful, after all these years. Isn't there any other way?"

"It will be horrible having to explain to people, and they'll talk," Jansy said unhappily. "It will be bad for the Club."

"Bad for the school too," Phyl observed. "But I don't see anything else for it, Lavender."

"It will be bad for us as well," Nanta said grimly. "The Head isn't going to love the Hamlet Club after this." She leant forward over the librarian's desk. "Girls, for the sake of the school, to keep things going happily, couldn't we give in and find somebody else, for this year? Miss Raven promised she would let Tessa be Queen next year, if she showed herself steady and responsible in the meantime. Couldn't we?"

There was an immediate change in the atmosphere. The girls had listened, with sympathy for her obvious distress, but now they stiffened into definite opposition.

"No, we couldn't." The reply came from every corner.

"Whom could we ask?" Phyl demanded.

"Anybody; you—Sandra—anyone. Just to carry on for a year, to satisfy the Head, and have a coronation."

"We don't want to satisfy her. We don't want her butting into our affairs," said Diana.

"That's how we all feel," Margaret muttered.

"Is that how you all feel?" Nanta put the question directly to the meeting.

"Yes, it is!" The answer was defiant but unanimous.

"Then I must tell the Head." Nanta leaned on the desk, looking white.

The girls gazed at her, feeling uncomfortable.

"You don't seem to realise how hard it is for me," she broke out, her voice unsteady.

"It isn't fair! You shan't do it this time!" Jansy sprang on to the dais beside her. "Hamlet Clubbers, we're showing everything on to Lavender. It's mean! We ought to do our share. We'll send a deputation to the Head, and Lavender mustn't be on it. We'll tell the Head she did everything she could to make us be sensible, but that we wouldn't listen. Now please offer to be on the deputation! Be sports—come on! I don't want to do it a bit, but I'll be one, if I have to. We must let Lavender off. She's not going to do any more."

"How nice of you, Lob!" Sandra said warmly.

"It's lovely of you, Jansy, but it's no use. The Head expects me to bring her a message from the meeting," Nanta exclaimed.

"You shan't do any more, Nanta Rose," Jansy insisted.

"Perhaps I could be the deputation?" said a new voice, from the back of the room.

"Miss Verity!" On every side girls whirled round to face the young French mistress, who had come in unnoticed and had been standing silently near the door.

"Oh, I say, how ghastly! She'll tell the Head what everybody's been saying!"

Miss Verity heard the whisper that ran round. She came to the dais and stood by Nanta and Jansy.

"Girls! I am a member of the Club and I have every right to be here. You have been hospitable to me and have received me kindly; now perhaps I have a chance to repay your generous welcome. I shall not betray anything that has been said, of course; but being a sort of half-and-half—Hamlet Club and Staff—I may be able to discuss your difficulty with the Head, as none of you could do. I see her point, and I see yours. We all want to have a coronation. We have to find some way."

She had come to the school a year and a half before, and was well liked by the girls. Twenty-two years ago, her aunt, Marguerite Verity, had been the third Queen of the Club and one of its original members, and as Queen "Strawberry" she had helped Joy during her first difficult days as Queen. Her niece had been welcomed warmly by all who had known Marguerite; she had been eager to learn English folk-dances, as her life had been spent in France. The Club had accepted her and had taught her; she had danced with the girls at their parties and at Nanta's crowning.

"Will you let me try what I can do?" she asked.

The girls looked at her doubtfully, and she laughed. "Your consciences are uneasy, and I don't wonder. I shall merely tell Miss Raven how very strong your feeling is; she can't know unless she is told, and she would feel Queen Lavender was prejudiced. The only thing I shall repeat is how bravely Rosalind has spoken and how loyal she has been to the Head and to the school. That I shall certainly do."

"Hear, hear!" Jansy said loudly.

"Oh, please, Miss Verity! Please don't!" Nanta begged.

"Don't be mad, Nanta Rose," Jansy scolded. "I shall do it, if Miss Verity doesn't. Any deputation must say you've done your best."

"Yes, we must say that," Miss Verity agreed. "Well, girls? Will you let me try?"

"Yes, please, Miss Verity." The girls sounded subdued, not liking the thought that their wild talk had been overheard.

"Good! I will see Miss Raven at once. Off you go, all of you! It's getting late. You shall hear the result to-morrow. Janice, tell Lady Quellyn that Rosalind is to go to bed. She's tired out."

“Oh, please, no!” Nanta cried. “I couldn’t sleep!”

“Early, then. You are very tired. You’ll see to it, Janice?”

“Yes, Miss Verity!” Jansy grinned at the Queen. “I’ll put you to bed, Nanta Rose.”

CHAPTER IX

HOPE FOR THE CLUB

“So you were present at the meeting?” The Head looked at Miss Verity in amusement. “How much can you tell me? I am anxious to know the real feeling in the Club. But I suppose you can’t say very much?”

“They were afraid I was going to betray them wholesale, when they discovered I was there,” Miss Verity laughed. “I can’t do that, of course. But they were going to send a deputation, so I offered to take on the job. I hope you won’t mind, but I’ve sent them all home and told Rosalind Kane to go to bed early. She was quite worn out.”

“I’m sorry. Was the meeting so difficult?”

“For her, yes. The one thing I am requested to tell you is how brave and loyal our Queen was,” and Miss Verity told of Nanta’s guidance and her final pleading speech. “It was for the good of the school and all against her own wishes. She did her best to lead the meeting, but it was almost too much for her. She’s an artist through and through, and she hates trouble.”

“Yes, she is very sensitive. She is a good leader for that reason. I’m glad you sent her home. Tell me what you can, without being unfair to the girls.”

The Head looked grave when she realised the strength of feeling in the Club. “They won’t choose anyone else? They would rather give up the crowning?”

“Yes. But the seniors feel that would be a disaster.”

“A very great pity. The story would be all over the town. We should have enquiries from the local papers—from everyone.”

“It would be tragic,” Miss Verity agreed.

“I can’t go back from the position I have taken as regards Tessa. And I do not wish to do so. She must, at least, have a period of probation before I can allow her to act as Queen. I am glad she offered to withdraw; she has been honest about the affair all through. But I can’t feel she is ready to be Queen. I must abide by what I have said.”

“I had an idea, while the girls were talking,” and Miss Verity leaned forward and spoke urgently. “A small idea, but it might help.”

Miss Raven gazed at her thoughtfully. “Yes, that would do. It’s clever; I could agree to that. Thank you, my dear! I will think over your plan, and in the morning I will talk to Rosalind. I wonder if she would help us? She’s the only one. We can’t ask anything of Janice Raymond next term.”

“No, her exam must come first. Rosalind will be anxious to help the Club, if she can arrange it.” And Miss Verity went home, more hopeful for the morrow.

She rang up the Hall presently and asked if she might speak to Lady Rosalind. “We all completely forget that title,” she laughed, as she waited.

Jansy answered the call. “Rosalind is in the Abbey, Miss Verity. Shall I fetch her for you?”

“No, don’t disturb her. I’m sure she finds the Abbey restful. Tell her I feel more hopeful about the Club. Miss Raven wants to see her to-morrow. That’s all I can say at the moment.”

“Thank you, Miss Verity. It will cheer her up. Was the Head very mad with us?”

“No, not in the least. Why should she be mad?”

“Oh, well! We wouldn’t do what she wanted. But we couldn’t, could we?”

“Choose a new Queen? No, I don’t think you could. Make Rosalind go to bed early, Janice.”

“Yes, I will. Thank you for helping us, Miss Verity.”

Jansy flung on her coat and took up a torch. “I’ll fetch Nanta Rose home, Auntie Joy. Miss Verity hopes it’s going to be all right, but she couldn’t tell me what she meant.”

In the Abbey parlour Nanta had told the story of the meeting to Rachel.

“You did your best. I think you did very well indeed,” Rachel said. “I hope things will turn out all right. Damaris is very sympathetic and distressed; I spoke to her again this morning. My phone is going to cost me a small fortune, but it’s my only extravagance. I’ve sold another short story; that will help to pay the bill! Damaris asked me to give you a message, Nanta Rose.”

Nanta smiled at her. “How nice of you! My baby name sounds friendly. Jansy always uses it.”

“I like it too. Damaris wants you for a bridesmaid. Will you?”

“Me?” Nanta exclaimed, startled. “Oh, she can’t want me! It’s all right to have Jansy and the twins, and they’ll look a picture, all just alike. But I’m far too old and big! I’d spoil the picture entirely.”

“She doesn’t think so. She has planned a procession, and she wants you and Jansy for the last couple. You won’t match in height, but that doesn’t really matter; you’ll both be taller than the twins. Damaris wants me to be chief bridesmaid and wait on her; then Rosemary and Hermione, then the twins, and you and Jansy at the end. Think it over! It really would please her, if you’d consent.”

“I’m awfully bucked that she wants me,” Nanta said doubtfully. “But I shall look far too tall and grown-up.”

“Damaris wants a blue and green wedding,” Rachel said, with a laugh. “It’s to remind her of our schooldays, when our uniform frocks were either blue or green. She wanted me to wear white, but I protested and begged for a coloured dress; I wear white every day! So I’m to be in blue; then the babes and the twins in green, and you and Jansy, if you will, in blue, behind them.”

“It would look lovely,” Nanta exclaimed. “The younger maids in green and the grown-ups in deep blue. It does sound pretty, Rachel! I’d like to be in that procession!”

“Treating Jansy as a grown-up; she’ll be greatly intrigued,” Rachel agreed. “The twins will protest that they’re nearly as old as she is.”

“Oh, but they’re not! That year and a half makes a lot of difference. In this mess at school, the twins took the obvious popular side every time, while Jansy thought as a grown-up,” Nanta said earnestly.

“The twins aren’t fourteen yet. They must certainly dress in the younger colour. Jansy loves deep blue; think of her lobelia train, as a Queen!”

“She looks lovely in it,” Nanta assented, “with her dark red hair.”

“The twins, with the same hair, will look very pretty in green. You like blue too, don’t you? Didn’t you wear blue at Lady Virginia’s wedding?”

“Yes. Oh, I love blue! I really think—will you tell Mary Damayris how proud and happy I shall be, to wait on her at her wedding?”

“Then you’ll do it. I’m glad.” Rachel thanked her warmly.

“Are you telling Rachel about the meeting?” Jansy came running in. “Nanta Rose, a phone call from Miss Verity”; and she gave the message.

“I wonder what has happened!” Nanta exclaimed. “Oh, dear! Isn’t it hard to wait? I’d better ring Tessa, though there isn’t much to say. I promised I’d tell her anything I could.”

“Stop thinking about it till the morning, both of you,” Rachel advised. “Go to bed, and dream about a procession of green and blue maids!”

“What does she mean?” Jansy stared at Rachel. “Is she wandering in her mind, Nanta Rose?”

Nanta laughed, and Rachel saw it with relief. “No; she’s talking about frocks for bridesmaids. I’m going to be your partner at the wedding; will you have me?”

“Whoops! I’ll love to walk with you! Does Mary Damayris want you too? What sport! Are we going to wear green and blue mixed?”

“It’s very nice of Mary Damayris. I’ll tell you all about the procession as we go through the Abbey.”

“It has given them something new to think about,” Rachel said to herself, as she bade the girls good-night. “Damaris will be pleased. I wonder how this school affair is going to work out?”

Everyone was asking the same question, from Nanta and Jansy, as they went early to bed, and Tessa, ashamed and unhappy, under her aunt’s severely disapproving eye, to the school in general and the Hamlet Club in particular, when they met next morning.

“Go to the Head quickly and get it over, and then come and tell us, Nanta Rose!” Jansy begged.

“Go and find out the worst,” said Phyl and Sandra.

“I hope it will be the best,” Nanta retorted, as she went to Miss Raven’s study.

CHAPTER X

THE HEAD'S WAY OUT

"Come away, my dear! Are you rested?" Miss Raven asked. "I hear last night's meeting tired you?"

"I was tired, Miss Raven, but I managed to sleep. I'm all right to-day."

"Music? Or your Abbey?" the Head smiled.

"I went into the Abbey; that always helps. Oh, Miss Raven, please tell me! Can you help the Club?"

"I think so. You can help, too, if you will."

"I'll do anything for the Club! How can I help?"

"I must keep to what I said. Tessa must show herself trustworthy before I can allow her to act as Queen. But we are all anxious to have the crowning as usual. How would it be if Tessa were crowned on May-Day, for the sake of appearances and the general public, but did not take up her duties as Queen until the autumn term? I spoke of a year's probation, and another Queen in the interval; but I will meet the wishes of the Club so far as to accept Tessa as Queen after one term, if in that time she has shown herself to be trusted. The crowning in May would be nominal; she would not reign till September. You would have a private ceremony at the beginning of the autumn term, when she would be given her Queen's medal and her reign would start in earnest. You don't think it would be a success?" She looked keenly at Nanta's downcast face.

"It's very good of you to try to find a way out for us, Miss Raven," Nanta said. "But I'm bothered about the summer. There's a good deal for the Queen to do during the summer term. The Club would have no Queen, and they might get slack. And I'm afraid the girls would never remember; if Tessa had been crowned they'd treat her as Queen and expect her to act for them."

"The Club must have a leader, of course. Someone must act as Queen for the term. I suggest it should be you. Could you not stay with us till the end of July and carry on as Queen? We should all like to have you." And the Head smiled happily, well pleased with her suggestion.

"I? Oh, I couldn't do that!" A cry broke from Nanta.

Miss Raven's face filled with disappointment. "We should like to keep you a little longer," she urged. "And you would be doing a great service to the Club. I am sure Lady Virginia would agree."

"Virginia wants me this summer," Nanta cried desperately. "It's all arranged! I'm to live with her, and she really needs me, Miss Raven."

"But Lady Virginia can have all the help she wants?"

"Oh yes! She has nurses for Nancy Rose. But they aren't company for her. Gilbert is going to lectures in Bristol, and Virginia will be alone all day. She isn't going out much this summer." Her eyes met Miss Raven's, full of distress.

"A brother coming for Nancy Rose? A son and heir—how pleased Sir Gilbert will be!"

"We hope so. A little boy would be nice. But don't you see, Miss Raven? We've planned to have the summer together. It—it won't happen till the autumn."

"I do see. I had no idea we should be asking such a sacrifice of you. Many girls would welcome the chance of another term, when they are leaving school finally; I hoped you would feel the same. For the sake of the Club, could you not bear to give up the summer with your sister?"

Nanta stood looking down, struggling for self-control. "Isn't there anybody else?" she asked unsteadily. "Couldn't Jansy act as Queen? She was Queen last year, and she was a very good one."

"She was an excellent little Queen. But her big exam is this term. We can't ask anything extra of her. She must give all her attention to her work."

"Yes. No, she can't do it. If only Marigold would come back!" Nanta wailed.

"The Queen before Jansy, who is now in Ceylon? What was her name?"

"Joan Fraser, but everybody calls her Littlejan, or Marigold. She may come back, but not before the autumn," Nanta said drearily. "Jean was the Queen after her, before Jansy, but she's at college. There isn't anybody else."

"Will you think it over?" Miss Raven almost pleaded. "You are so very suitable. Even though Tessa is crowned, so long as you are here the girls will turn to you as Queen. It would solve all our difficulties. We should be very happy to keep you for three months longer. Don't decide hurriedly, my dear! Perhaps the need of the Club will persuade you, when you consider the idea carefully."

Nanta gave her a hunted glance. "I've been looking forward so much to living with Virginia," she said breathlessly.

"I am very sorry," the Head said again. "Suppose you think it over for a day or two? There is no one else who could help us as you can."

Nanta saw that clearly. She went to class, but did no work, and would have been in trouble with everybody if Miss Raven had not sent an urgent message to each mistress.

"Don't worry Rosalind Kane to-day. She is thinking over an idea I have put to her. She can't give her mind to her work."

So Nanta was left to wrestle with her problem, much to the surprise of her companions.

"You made a jolly old mess of your French, my dear! I wonder Miss Verity didn't fling you out," said Sandra.

"So do I," Nanta said grimly. "I was expecting to be crushed to atoms at any moment."

Tessa was eyeing her anxiously. At break she managed to draw the Queen into a corner.

"Lavender, tell me! What's going to happen?"

"I don't know. Nothing's decided. I'll tell you when anything's fixed. Leave me alone! I must speak to Jansy."

Tessa drew back. She had come to rely on Nanta's sympathy and understanding, and the curt refusal was a blow.

Nanta saw it. "I'm sorry," she said hurriedly. "But you don't know how awful things are—for me, I mean. I think it's going to be all right for you."

"I don't understand." Tessa gave her a startled look. "I'm the one who's in a mess, not you."

"Yes, but I can get you out of it, and—I don't know if I can bear it. Don't bother me just now!"

And Nanta hurried away, leaving Tessa staring after her.

"Nanta Rose! Oh, tell me!" Jansy came flying from her classroom. "What's happened? Oh, I say, you do look odd!"

“I feel odd. The Head’s knocked me silly. Listen, Jan!” In a corner of the playground Nanta told of Miss Raven’s proposal.

Jansy gave a shout of joy. “Then the Club’s saved! Everything’s all right! Oh, Nanta Rose, isn’t that glorious? A coronation as usual—and we’ll have you for a whole summer longer! Oh, cheers! What’s the matter?”

Nanta looked at her, with drawn white face. “That’s all very well, but I want to be with Virginia this summer and she needs me. It’s all planned. I can’t give it up—I *can*!”

Jansy stared at her blankly. “You won’t stay for the summer? Oh, Nanta Rose, you wouldn’t let the Club down like that!”

“You think it would be letting down the Club?” Nanta asked unhappily.

“But don’t you think so? The Club needs you badly. You can put everything right for all of us. Oh, Nanta Rose! Do you care so dreadfully much?”

“I’m afraid I do. I don’t want to let anybody down, but why should it be Virginia instead of the Club? She really is counting on having me.”

“I see,” Jansy said gloomily. “But she could have you later on?”

“It wouldn’t be the same. In the winter she’ll have Gilbert at home. He’s going to lectures during the summer and it will leave her all alone. We’d planned to have such a jolly summer together. I know Gilbert will be upset, if I’m not there. He’s counting on having me, for company for her, quite as much as she is.”

Jansy looked very crestfallen. “It seemed such a marvellous way out of the mess. I see how you feel, but if you *could* do it, we’d love you for ever. We were all sorry this was your last term. Doesn’t that seem to you rather wonderful, Nanta Rose?”

Nanta looked startled. “What is wonderful, Lob?”

“You haven’t been in the school for centuries, like most of us; you’ve only been here just two years. You came as a senior and a Cookery. And yet you’re our Queen, and one of the best Queens we’ve ever had, and nobody wants to lose you. If you’ll only stay even one term more, everybody will be glad. I think it’s marvellous, the way the school has taken to you!”

Nanta laughed, in spite of her trouble. “Jansy, what nonsense!”

“Oh, but it isn’t! It may be nonsense to say it’s marvellous, because it isn’t; of *course*, everybody likes you, because you’re you. They couldn’t possibly help it. But all the same, it’s a jolly fine record; you’ve made good in the school, and we don’t want you to go away.”

“Oh, don’t talk rubbish!” Nanta cried. “Go and tell the Club all that I’ve told you. I can’t face another meeting! Get hold of the Hamlets and explain to them. But say I haven’t decided; say I haven’t even begun to decide. I’ll need to write to Virginia. Nothing can be fixed for a few days. Tell the girls not to speak about it to me!”

“I’ll tell them all that,” Jansy said soberly. “You shan’t be hustled. But if you tell Lady Virginia you’d like to stay and help the Club, she won’t object, will she?”

Nanta gave her the desperate look she had given Miss Raven. “No, Lob, she won’t object. She’ll tell me to do what I think right. I have to decide; I know that.”

“I know what Aunt Rosamund would say.”

“So do I,” Nanta said unhappily.

“I’ll tell the girls.” Jansy turned away.

Suddenly she came rushing back and seized Nanta by the arm. “Nanta Rose—the motto of the Club! And you’re the Queen. I know it’s hard on you, but you can’t forget the motto! ‘To be or not to be’—oh, Nanta Rose! You’ll have to stand by the Club!”

Breathless, they stared at one another. Then Nanta said unsteadily, "I wasn't thinking of the motto, but it's another reason. Inside me I know I shall have to do it, but don't say that to anybody yet, Jansy. I must write to Virginia. I haven't decided; I haven't!" and she turned and ran from Jansy, back into the school.

"Poor old Nanta Rose!" Jansy murmured. "But she'll stand by us and we shall have a crowning, after all."

CHAPTER XI

QUEEN THERESA

Before classes began again Nanta went to the Head's study.

"Miss Raven, might I write a letter this afternoon, instead of my music lesson? It will go a whole day sooner than if I write from the Abbey to-night. I can't decide anything till I've told Virginia."

Miss Raven gave her a quick look. "Does that mean you are going to be brave and generous, my dear?"

"I don't know. Truly, I don't know! But I must tell Virginia," Nanta pleaded.

"Yes, of course. Come in here to write your letter. I have a meeting and must be out all afternoon; you won't be disturbed."

"Thank you, Miss Raven. I told Jansy what you suggested and asked her to tell the rest," Nanta said hurriedly. "I couldn't stand another meeting like last night's."

"If you are going to help the Club, that was a good plan. But if you are not, wasn't it rather rash? They won't want you to refuse, you know."

"They won't let me off," Nanta admitted. "I think perhaps that was why I did it. But they had to know. They're all on edge, Miss Raven. I had to tell them."

"I shall be glad when the matter is settled," the Head said ruefully. "The school is completely upset. If you will ease their minds, they may settle to work again. I must speak to Tessa."

"I'm very sorry for Tessa," Nanta ventured.

"She certainly never dreamt she would cause so much trouble, reaching even to your sister and spoiling your plans for the summer. That is"—the Head added—"if you decide to help the Club."

Nanta stood silent, looking down. At last she met Miss Raven's eyes bravely. "Jansy challenged me to live up to the Club motto. If the Queen doesn't care about it, we can't expect the girls to care."

"Ah, yes! We don't hear much about the motto, but it urges your members to a right choice at a crisis. It ought to be a real help to them and to the school. This is certainly your chance to live up to it, my dear."

"It isn't easy, Miss Raven."

"I don't suppose it is ever easy. But a right choice is always well worth while."

Nanta thought of the Hamlet Club, its Queens and its dancing for twenty-five years, which had come from one schoolgirl's right choice. "It has been worth while," she said. "In the past of the Club, I mean. But it hasn't been easy."

"It needs the more courage, for that very reason. Send Tessa to me before afternoon school. And come here any time after half-past two; I will leave everything ready for you."

"Thank you very much, Miss Raven. Would you mind if I went out for dinner at the dairy? I've been there with Jansy. I don't want to talk to people."

"By all means! You may go alone, if you wish, in spite of the rule that two must go together. You are almost a grown-up, aren't you? But don't brood too much over this trouble, Rosalind."

"I'll try. Thank you again, very much indeed." And, grateful for the understanding which allowed her to be alone, Nanta slipped off when morning classes were over and could not be found by the girls who wanted to hear the Head's way out.

"Hamlet Club meeting at two o'clock in the gym." Jansy passed the word round. Spirits went up with a leap and day-girls hurried back from lunch.

"Where's the Queen?" asked Phyl. "What are you doing, stuck up on that horse, Lob?"

Jansy, astride the vaulting horse, retorted, "I'm taking the meeting; I called it. I'm in the chair; this thing is the chair! We don't know where Lavender is; I think she's lost, or run away, or gone home. But she told me what the Head wants; and I'm going to tell all of you, when you're ready to listen."

"Where's Tessa?" asked Sandra.

"Perhaps she's gone with Rosalind. Perhaps they're having a fight," Margaret Marchwood suggested hopefully.

"Gone to the Head, poor old thing," said Phyl. "We don't know what for."

"I know what for," Jansy announced.

The Club crowded round, eager to hear. Enthroned on the horse, Jansy told of Miss Raven's terms, and, before the relieved chorus could break out, rushed on to the story of what it would mean to the Queen to accept those terms.

"You're not to speak to her about it. She'll do the right thing, but she mustn't be hustled into it or worried. Leave her alone till she decides."

"It's jolly hard on her," Sandra said, while the younger girls broke into excited comment.

"It's rotten for her. I know how much she cares. But we talked about the motto, and I believe she's going to help."

"It will be lovely to have her for the summer term. I hope she won't feel too bad about it," Phyl said wistfully. "We'll leave her in peace while she's making up her mind, of course."

"The coronation won't be very comfortable," Sandra remarked. "Tessa won't feel too good about it."

"I hadn't thought of that." Jansy, on her high seat, looked down at them with troubled eyes. "She'll feel horrible, knowing she isn't to be really Queen till September. I say, everybody!" She raised her voice in a shout.

The girls turned to her again. "Something more?" asked Elizabeth.

"Hamlet Clubbers, there's one person we aren't thinking about and that's Tessa. She'll feel rather bad, I'm afraid, especially at the crowning. It can't be a very jolly thing for her, after what's happened. I know Nanta Rose—oh, sorry! I mean Lavender," as a laugh went round—"will try to buck her up. We've all got to help. Be extra nice to Tessa, everybody. Remember how simply hateful it is for her to have her crowning spoilt."

"It's her own fault," Margaret said instantly.

"She won't like it any better for that," Elizabeth retorted. "You wouldn't yourself, Twin."

"No, I suppose I wouldn't," Margaret admitted. "All right, Lob! We'll help Tessa to buck up."

"And don't tease Rosalind," was Jansy's final word.

Nanta came in from her solitary lunch as the meeting broke up and the girls went across to the school. The ex-Queen's words had taken effect, and she was left in peace by the crowd. Relieved but a little surprised, she was going to the cloakroom when Jansy ran after her.

"Where have you been, Nanta Rose? We thought you were lost. I thought perhaps you'd gone home by train."

“I had lunch at the dairy. The Head said I might.”

“All on your own? You are an important person!”

Nanta gave her a very small smile. “I wanted to be by myself. Miss Raven understood.”

“Well, I say! Nobody’s going to worry you. We’ve had a meeting and I told them.”

The Queen gave her a startled glance. “You haven’t lost much time! Tell me about it later. There’s Tessa! I want to speak to her.”

“I want *you*! Clear out, Lob! I must speak to Lavender.”

Jansy fled, and Tessa spoke hurriedly.

“Rosalind, the Head told me. Will you really do it? It will be quite incredibly decent of you, if you will.”

Nanta looked at her gravely. “I can’t say yet. I must write to my sister; I’ve promised to be with her. She must say if she’s willing.”

“She’ll let you off, if you ask her. I’m terribly sorry it’s so rotten for you,” Tessa said breathlessly. “I say! I don’t like the idea of being crowned, with all this hanging over me! I asked the Head if it couldn’t be put off until I could be really Queen; I shall feel awful! But she wiped the floor with me; said it was for the sake of the school and what I felt didn’t matter, and we must have a May-Day ceremony because of school tradition. Said we couldn’t break it after all these years, and if you were going to be decent enough to make it possible, I must play up and go through with it. I feel it will be horrible; a sort of farce.”

“Oh, you mustn’t feel like that!” Nanta exclaimed. “It would be dreadful for everybody! I won’t crown you, if you go through it looking like a martyr! You must buck up and be a jolly Queen. We know you’ll be a lovely one, with your beautiful train!”

Tessa wavered. “I want it most fearfully, and I want to wear that gorgeous thing Miss Lane is making for me, but I can’t feel as jolly about it as I expected I should.”

Nanta looked sober. “If it happens—I can only say ‘if’ just now—both you and I will have to forget what we feel for the sake of the Club. We *must* play up and make it as jolly and happy as usual, however hard we find it. We must forget everything else, just for those few hours. I must go, Tessa. I’ve something important to do. I’m not coming to classes.”

“If it happens”—Tessa began urgently—“if it happens, you’d better call me Queen Theresa. I said I wouldn’t be crowned as Theresa, but it sounds grown-up and proper, and that’s what I shall have to be. Tessa’s been a silly kid, who made a mess of things. Theresa may be more sensible.”

“Oh, Tessa!” Nanta laughed. “But it’s a good idea. I always said Queen Theresa sounded royal! I like it.”

“I may get to like it, when I feel more like Theresa,” Tessa retorted.

CHAPTER XII

A LETTER TO VIRGINIA

"I want to post a letter," Nanta said to Frost.

He obligingly took the car round by the post-office, and she gave the letter to Margaret. "Drop that in for me, please, Margaret-Twin."

Margaret hurled herself into the car again. "It was to Lady Virginia! Oh, Nanta Rose, you've been writing letters in class! A big girl like you!"

Nanta had looked grave, as she saw the letter go, but now she broke into a laugh. "Oh, Margaret! Do you really believe that?"

"When did you write it, then?"

"Did you do it in the shop, at lunch-time?" asked Elizabeth. "Was that why you went all alone?"

"I wrote it in Miss Raven's room. She was out, so she told me to go in there. She knew all about it, Twins."

"Oh! What a good idea!" Jansy cried. "If you'd written at home it would have been too late to post to-night."

"That was the point," Nanta told her gravely.

"I'm glad it's gone," Jansy said fervently. "You'd have worried till you had written it, wouldn't you? Now you needn't go on thinking about it. You've got to wait for Lady Virginia."

"I'll try not to think about it," Nanta promised. "Tell me what you did at the meeting!"

The story had to be told at home, of course. Every one of the "old Queens" was waiting for news.

"Oh, cheers!" cried Jen Marchwood. "Then we needn't bother about that petition! The Head and Miss Verity have found a way out." Her eyes filled with sympathy, as she looked at Nanta. "It's hard on you, but you'll do it, for the Club. And how glad we shall be to have you here for the summer! Rachel and I were wondering how we could keep you a little longer."

Nanta coloured. "Not really, Lady Jen?"

"Oh, yes! We talked about it one day. We were going to make excuses to keep you here. If Joy won't have you, you must come and live with me."

Nanta looked at Joy. "When I hear what Virginia says——"

"I'll be only too glad if you'll stay here," Joy said. "My scatter-brains always behave better if your royal eye is on them. Jansy's isn't quite powerful enough. They've known her too long."

"Mother, we aren't!" Margaret protested.

"You are!" said her mother. "I sometimes see glimmerings of hope in Elizabeth, but you are still my wild Margaret."

"Your Peggy-Twin," Margaret coaxed.

"Certainly not! Don't spoil your fine old name. Nanta, my dear, if you will spend the summer with us, we shall all be delighted."

"It is kind of you, Lady Joy. I'd hate to be a boarder at school."

"I should think so! There will always be room for you here. If we should be crowded out we'll send you into the Abbey to Rachel."

“Oh, please invite a crowd! I’d love to stay in the Abbey!”

“A big crowd, Aunt Joy! Then I could go too,” Jansy cried.

“Nobody is going anywhere,” Joy said firmly. “Rachel is busy with her book. We mustn’t dump you people on her.”

“What a lovely chance to do a big thing for the Club!” said Mary Devine, when she heard the news. “It’s sad for you to give up your summer with your sister, but she will forgive you, when it means so much to the school. You’re not only giving them a coronation but you’re upholding the motto to the Club, bearing aloft its standard. You’ll be very happy to remember it later on.”

“That’s a marvellous idea, Mary-Dorothy.” The Queen gazed at her wide-eyed.

“It’s the work of the Queen to be the leader,” said Mary.

In the Abbey Rachel’s comment was on the same lines.

“What a wonderful chance to repay the Club for all they have given you!” she exclaimed.

“I feel that,” Nanta admitted. “They wanted me at first because I fiddled for their dancing. But they really have made me one of them, although I came as a senior. And then making me Queen—I can’t tell you how I felt about that. It was rather marvellous, Rachel.”

“And now you’re going to do a very big thing for them.”

Nanta’s eyes saw again the picture that was tormenting her, of those long happy days under the trees at Summerton, quietly knitting and sewing with Virginia. How eagerly they had been looking forward to this summer! And she must spend these months in the noise and turmoil of school, carrying the responsibility of the Club, leading the juniors, making things easy for Tessa, who was to blame for it all; while Virginia worked alone, needing her company.

“It is a big thing, because I’d so much rather not do it,” she owned.

“But you will. I think you’ve decided already.”

“Yes—when I wrote to Virginia. There’d have been no point in writing, if I’d meant to refuse. But I won’t do it unless she is willing. If she begs me to go home I shall go,” Nanta said defiantly.

“I don’t believe she will, from all I have heard of her,” Rachel remarked.

“The atmosphere is still tense,” said the Head to Miss Verity next day. “But it’s not as bad as it was. Are the girls working better?”

“They’re working feverishly,” Miss Verity laughed. “They are waiting for a letter from Lady Virginia, and they’re drowning their suspense in hard work.”

“It won’t hurt them. We can’t expect to hear for a few days. Rosalind seems resigned to her fate; she’s much calmer.”

“She’s very sporting,” Miss Verity said. “And she has put the matter in her sister’s hands. She knows she has to wait.”

But Virginia was not very far from her own schooldays and she understood her sister. She guessed at the tension in the Hamlet Club and she knew what Nanta’s state of mind must be.

She received the letter by a late post, and she rang up the Hall that same evening. “Can I speak to Nanta, Lady Quellyn? Thank you.—Oh, my dear, I’ve had your letter. I’m so sorry! I shall miss you every day.”

“Virginia! Oh, how nice of you to ring! Then you think——?”

“I knew you couldn’t wait for a letter. You must do what they want, of course. You couldn’t possibly refuse. But I could wring that girl’s neck for spoiling our summer.”

“She’s very much upset about it. I’m sorry for her.”

“Yes, I know. But she’s a little wretch, all the same. I’m writing, but I thought you’d like to ease their minds at school. I know you’ll be restless till it’s settled. I like the Hamlet Club, but I don’t love them very much at the moment. But it won’t hurt your cooking or your French to have one more term, Nanta dear!”

“I’m afraid that’s true,” Nanta admitted. “I’ve had a good time at school.”

“And not too much hard work. Try to pick up a few useful facts during the summer! And I really don’t see why you shouldn’t have several week-ends with us; you could leave at midday on Friday and have all Saturday and Sunday here. Your Head will agree to anything you ask for. Tell her I want you every week-end!”

“It’s not what we planned. I meant to keep you company while Gilbert is away. You’ll have him at the week-ends.”

“But this job must be done, and apparently only you can do it. Go ahead with my blessing, Nanta dear! And come to us for every minute of the holidays. The tulips are going to be wonderful; you know our Summerton tulips are famous. Good luck! Have you told Aunt Rosamund?”

“Not yet. I had to hear what you thought first.”

“Tell her now. She’ll be glad.”

“Are you quite well? And Nancy Rose?” Nanta cried.

“Both of us splendid. You’ll have my letter in a day or two. Good-bye!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE HAMLET CLUB MEETS

Rosamund received the news joyfully. "What a brick you are, Rosalind! I call that being a real Queen. It's something like what I had to do, though it wasn't any sacrifice to me. I was delighted to be Queen for two years."

"Were you? I didn't know. How did it happen?"

"Jen was the Queen after me, and she had to go home because her father was ill. She had only a very short time as Queen; I carried on for her, and she never came back to school. Her father died, and she got engaged to Kenneth; she'll tell you the story. It's good of Virginia to spare you."

"It leaves her alone a lot. I'm feeling very bad about it."

"Oh, don't feel bad! That won't make a happy coronation! Look outwards, and think what you're doing for the Club, and for Tessa—silly child!—and for Miss Raven. Don't gaze inwards at your own feelings."

"I'll try," Nanta promised.

Jansy and the twins danced with joy when they heard the news from Summerton.

"We'll have a meeting to-morrow and tell the Club," Jansy proclaimed.

"Not till I've seen Miss Raven," Nanta said hurriedly. "Couldn't you just tell the girls? We've had enough meetings!"

"Oh, but we must send a vote of thanks from the whole Club to Lady Virginia, Nanta Rose!"

"I think perhaps she'd like that," Nanta admitted.

"You will make the girls very happy, and it is a great relief to me," said the Head, next morning. "I hope you are not feeling too grieved, my dear?"

"I'm trying not to think of that side of it, Miss Raven."

"That is brave. I am sure that the girls' delight will help you to keep their point of view steadily before you. On behalf of myself and the school, I thank you. We did not want to break the tradition of so many years."

"It would have been dreadful," Nanta said gravely. "People would have asked so many questions."

"Tell the girls not to talk about it to outsiders. Your former Queens must know, I suppose, but the public need see nothing different in this crowning. We will keep the story to ourselves."

Nanta faced the crowd in the gym that afternoon with sober eyes. "I have a message from the Head——"

She could go no further. A storm of clapping and cheering broke out and would not be stilled.

Flushed and startled, she tried to make herself heard.

"Oh, please! I can't go on——!"

Jansy, squatting on a mattress at her feet, looked up and grinned.

"It's like Mary Damayris's first appearance, when the whole theatre shrieked and yelled because she'd come back, and she couldn't go on dancing. We feel rather like that. We thought

we were losing you this term, but you've come back to us, bringing a coronation for Tessa with you, Nanta Rose. Shall I make them shut up for you?"

"Please do, if you can, Lob. I shall run away, as Mary Damayris did, in another minute."

"I can shout when I want to! You've such a soft pretty little voice—no good for meetings!" Jansy leapt on to the horse, beside which they were standing, and gave a ringing shout. "Hamlet Clubbers, be *quiet!*"

Laughing, the girls sobered down and listened while the Queen gave the message from the Head. "You won't talk to outsiders, will you?" she pleaded.

"Rather not!" said Phyl. "I say, Rosalind, thanks a million from us all!"

"We all want the same thing." Nanta spoke before the tumult could break out again. "We want a crowning that is as happy as usual, in every way. It's up to us, to all of you as well as to me, to make it a jolly time and not let anybody guess we nearly didn't have one this year."

"Hear, hear!" Jansy said loudly. "May I say something now? You can't do it yourself."

"What can't she do?" asked Sandra, as Nanta nodded.

"Propose a vote of thanks to Lady Virginia. We ought to send her a letter."

"Oh, yes, rather! Yes, of course we must," Sandra agreed.

"Good idea," said Phyl. "I suggest that Lob writes the letter for us. Has anyone anything to say against that? Carried unanimously! Now, ex-Queen, mind you thank her prettily!"

"I'd like to be the one to write," Jansy said promptly. "I'm so tremendously grateful to Nanta Rose. I'll love to tell Lady Virginia how we feel."

Tessa had been listening from the back of the crowd. Now she came forward, looking rather white.

The girls made way for her silently. Watched apprehensively by Nanta and Jansy, she came and stood beside them. "May I say something?"

"If you really must, but there's no need," the Queen pleaded. "Everybody understands. Can't you leave things as they are?"

"I can't say much, but I shall always feel I've funk'd, if I let this chance slide."

Tessa faced the silent but interested Club.

"Everybody!" she said bravely. "I won't try to say how sorry I am that I've been such an ass and made such a mess of things. I think you know, and I'll try to show you, later on when I can be really Queen. I'd much rather have waited till the autumn, but the Head says we must have a May-Day crowning, and of course I see that it's important, for the sake of the school. I shall be very meek and humble all summer and never forget that I'm not really Queen."

"The thought of you being meek and humble is very cheering, old thing," said Phyl, as the girls grinned and the tension was eased.

"I can't begin, either, to thank Rosalind for the way she's seen me through this mess," Tessa went on steadily. "I know she wouldn't like it, if I tried. But some day I may be able to show her how much I appreciate the way she's stood by me. There's just one other thing; I've told her already. When the time comes I'm going to be Queen Theresa, and I'll try to be a good one. Tessa is a silly kid who isn't fit to be Queen. Perhaps Theresa will be more sensible. That's all!"

"A very plucky speech, Theresa," Nanta whispered.

CHAPTER XIV

DAMARIS TALKS OF BRIDESMAIDS

"I'm awfully upset about that fuss over the new Queen. I wish it hadn't happened through me! Would it help if Brian ran me in to Wycombe and I pleaded with Miss Raven?" Damaris asked.

She had come to the Abbey on Sunday, to spend a few hours with Rachel, to talk over the week's performances, to make plans for the future, and to discuss the garden with Benedicta.

"There's no need. The trouble is over," and Rachel told how the problem had been solved, while they strolled together among the hyacinths and daffodils of the former gate-house meadow.

"Good for Nanta and Lady Virginia! Oh, that's all right! I've been really worried about those girls."

"Nice of you, with all you have on your mind! I'm so glad you asked Nanta to be a bridesmaid. It pleased her and cheered her up at a bad time."

"She's an ornament to any procession," Damaris said, with a grin. "And I have to think of the reporters. It will look well in the papers—'Among the bridesmaids was Lady Rosalind Kane, youngest daughter of the late Earl of Kentisbury.' Sounds good!"

"If that's why you asked her, don't let her guess. She'd hate it."

"No, that's only a joke. I had a much bigger reason. I want Derek to meet her. He might not come across her in the crowd, but as a bridesmaid he can't miss her."

"Derek? Who is he?"

"Derek Grandison, Brian's young cousin, who is to be his best man. The best man must meet the bridesmaids!"

Rachel looked at her severely. "Are you trying your hand at match-making? Don't make a mess of things! Nanta Rose is still only a schoolgirl."

"She isn't, really, you know. But for that silly Tessa she'd leave school at Easter, and by June she'd be feeling entirely grown-up. And she's so very good-looking, like all her family! Derek can't help noticing her."

"She doesn't feel grown-up enough for a love-affair. Don't hurry her! You'll only give her a shock and upset her horribly."

"I'm sure Lady Virginia would like to see her happily married."

"In time, yes. But not yet!"

"It would be so very suitable," Damaris went on. "Derek's about twenty-three; just right for Nanta Rose! He's fairly well off; Brian knew him in South Africa, but his father and mother were alive then and he wouldn't leave them. They both died last year, and Derek has come to see how he likes England. He's living with my future in-laws; he's a rising young composer—oh, didn't I mention his music? Everyone says his stuff's jolly good. Daddy Grandison is very bucked and is helping him a lot. It would be marvellous for Derek to have a beautiful and talented violinist for a wife!"

Rachel laughed. "It does sound suitable! But let it happen naturally, Marry. Nanta may be nineteen, but she still thinks as a schoolgirl."

"I'd like to see her married to Derek. He's a jolly good sort, or of course I wouldn't dream of it. And I'd love to have Nanta Rose as a cousin-in-law! She wouldn't be Mrs. Grandison,

would she? For I'm going to be 'Young Mrs. Grandison.' Mother-in-law is quite reconciled to being 'Old Mrs. Grandison'."

"No, she keeps her title. They would be 'Mr. Derek and Lady Rosalind Grandison.' He'd have to put up with that."

"If I know Derek, he'll call her Lady Nanta," Damaris grinned. "How do the younger bridesmaids react to the idea?"

"The twins and Jansy are pleased but calm about it; they're old hands at the job. The twins were maids for both Maidlin and Lady Kentisbury. Jansy is thrilled to be one of the last couple and says she'll put her hair up for the occasion. Rosemary and Hermione are awed and solemn; they've never been bridesmaids before and they feel as if they were to conduct the whole ceremony."

Damaris laughed. "They'll look rather sweet, with their little round dark heads. I couldn't do without Brownie and Myonie Rose! Maidlin will give me away; I couldn't do without her either."

"No, Maid's our only relation. She must act as your father," Rachel agreed.

Preparations for the wedding had begun, for there was less than three months in which to do everything and Damaris was dancing several nights a week. She gave what time she could to shopping and sent off her purchases to Rachel, who fell on the parcels and tackled the sewing joyfully, her own work thrust into the background.

"It can wait, now that my first book is accepted. I want to get ahead with this in case proofs arrive. Of course I'm going to make your undies, silly!" she said, when Damaris protested. "I won't offer to do your wedding-dress, but there's a lot I can do and I can fling it aside if tourists come. I won't let you be married unless you wear something I've made for you. All shop stuff! Not likely!"

"Oh, if you're determined, that's the end of it! Thank you very much," Damaris laughed at her.

The term drew to its end with no more troubles at school. Tessa was subdued and quiet and very grateful to Nanta. She went to Miss Lane's cottage in the country to watch the decoration of her Queen's train, and stroked the soft yellow background wistfully, looking in delight at the long spikes of rose and blue and white and apricot lupins which were rising from the corners and stretching up the robe.

"It's going to be one of the loveliest we've had. I don't think I could have gone on living, if I'd known I was never going to wear it."

"I've enjoyed doing those lupins," said Margia Lane. "Don't forget that you owe it to Nanta from the Abbey!"

"I'll never forget," Tessa said fervently. "It's a good name for Lavender. I shall call her Nanta from the Abbey!"

With the end of term came holiday plans, but these were not elaborate. Jansy would go home to be with her family; her brother John, slightly younger than herself, was at boarding-school in York and she did not see enough of him and the little ones, Jennifer, Jimmy, and Jill. The twins asked nothing better than to stay in their own garden or go out in the woods and on the hills, with their small half-brothers, David and Richard, and Maidie-Rose, the baby. They grudged the long days spent at school, away from their little family, and were eager to be free to play with them for a few weeks.

Rosemary's big brothers would be home from York, and Alastair and Alan Fraser were to come to the Manor with them, instead of going to stay with Joan, as they usually did. Joan

was their guardian, in their mother's absence in Ceylon, and they had spent many holidays with her and John and Jansy. Feeling her house would be overfull of boys, Jen had invited Hermione to come and keep Rosemary company; Myonie's home was in Wycombe and a fortnight of country air would brace her up for the summer.

Nanta would go to Virginia at Summerton. But, as she explained to Rachel, sitting in the little Abbey parlour and stroking the golden cat, while Rachel sewed, she was to go to Kentisbury for the first day or two.

"Virginia and Gilbert are in Italy. Mya, Gilbert's sister, is engaged to an Italian cousin and they've gone to have a look at him. Mya is only my age, but she has always seemed older, and she has lived in Italy for a year and it has made her older still. Gilbert has gone to see about business arrangements; Virginia had never been to Italy, and she said the sooner she went the better, as it wouldn't be possible for some time, unless she went at once. They'll be home by the end of the week and then I shall go to Summerton."

"I suppose the little girl is left at home?"

"Oh yes! Nurse is very good. They didn't like leaving Nancy Rose, but they couldn't take her so far. When they come back, Gilbert's cousin, Nancybell Farnham, is coming to stay and she'll bring her baby, Nancy Sue, who is the same age as Nancy Rose. It will be fun to see them together."

"Another Nancy?" Rachel laughed.

"Nancybell is the name for girls in Gilbert's family, and both the babies have it. Mrs. Farnham's little girl is called Susan, for Mr. Farnham's mother, so she is Nancy Sue. I'm looking forward to playing with two Nancys."

"You'll have jolly holidays, and you've earned them," Rachel told her.

CHAPTER XV

HOSTESS FOR KENTISBURY

"I'm sorry, but I shall have to leave you alone for a few hours," Rosamund said, on the day after Nanta's arrival at Kentisbury.

"I don't mind." Nanta smiled at her young aunt. "It's such a change from school. Have you to go out?"

"Geoffrey is going to town for one night, and delicate husbands have to be looked after. There's a big debate in the House; he doesn't often go, but this really interests him; he may even speak. I'm going with him to make sure everything is all right; he'll stay at Kentisbury House for the night. Mrs. Bloom, the housekeeper, is very good and will take care of him, but I want to see for myself and give her some directions. I shall be back by six; I can't leave Baby Geoff for very long yet. Geoffrey will come home to-morrow afternoon. You can come with us, for the run to town, if you like?"

"I'd rather stay at home. I'll play with the babies and read that new book."

"Go out with Ferguson for a ride. Chestnut would be all the better for a run. If any visitors come, you can play hostess and give them tea."

"Oh, please! I'd be terrified!"

"Nonsense! You'd do it beautifully. But it's not likely. I'm supposed to be too much occupied with young Geoff; casual visitors won't turn up, and the family wouldn't come without ringing us first. You won't be interrupted in your solitude."

"I hope not!" Nanta said fervently.

Rosamund laughed. "I'd love to see you entertaining my guests! But it won't happen, so don't worry."

Nanta had had her ride, and her game with the two sets of twin girls, and had settled down happily to read, when the sound of a car reached her from the quadrangle. She threw aside her book and peered from a corner of the window.

"It looks like a taxi; it's not a big car. People getting out—what lovely hair the girl has! But I hope they won't come in. Oh, I believe it's happening! What shall I do? It's visitors—oh, I *can't*!"

"Perhaps Lady Rosalind will see you, sir," said a voice, as the door opened. "Lieutenant and Mrs. Kane, my lady."

With a little gasp of surprise and fright, Nanta stiffened and straightened and awaited the guests with panic in her eyes.

"I didn't know there was any Lieutenant Kane, or Mrs. Kane either." The thought shot through her alarmed mind.

A tall fair young man, in plain clothes, not uniform, faced her; behind him was the girl with the beautiful bright red curls, her hat in her hand. There was a moment's astonished silence, as they gazed at their frightened hostess; they saw a slim girl with yellow hair in big plaits round her head and startled blue eyes.

With a touch of grave dignity she came forward. "I am so sorry Aunt Rosamund has had to go to town. She asked me to take her place, if anyone came. I was just going to have tea, so perhaps you'll let me give you some."

"Bill!" the girl said urgently. "She doesn't understand. Tell her, Bill!"

“Glad to meet you, Cousin Rosalind,” said Bill Kane, with enthusiasm. “I’ve heard of you, but we haven’t met. You’re one of the girls who came from America, aren’t you? I’m Bill, and this is Patricia.”

Nanta looked at him in complete bewilderment. “I’m afraid that doesn’t help me much,” she said pathetically. “Yes, I’m the youngest of the cousins. I don’t understand, but you must be one of the family. I’m glad to meet you.”

“Not very, are you?” Bill grinned. “I know we’re a nuisance. I’m sorry, but we want to see my lord—Cousin Geoffrey. Will he be back soon?”

“Not till to-morrow afternoon,” Nanta faltered.

“Gosh! Patch, my girl, we’ve made a complete mess of things this time,” Bill said ruefully.

“Aunt Rosamund will be home by six, because of the baby,” Nanta volunteered.

“That’s not so bad! She’ll do; we’ll wait for her,” Bill announced. “I’m your cousin, though a rather far-off one. This is my wife.”

Patricia had not spoken, after her first urgent whisper. Now she darted forward. “I believe you’re as frightened as I am, Lady Rosalind. Oh, please be kind to us! We—we were only married yesterday, and we’ve come to confess.”

“To break the news to the family,” Bill said grimly.

Nanta’s eyes widened. “Yesterday? Is this your honeymoon?”

“It’s all we’re likely to have.” Patricia’s voice had almost a sob in it. “Bill’s a sailor, and he’s on special leave. He’ll have to go away.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Nanta cried. “That’s hard lines! Will you stay here, when he goes?”

The bride and bridegroom looked at one another. “Oh no!” Patricia said earnestly. “That’s not the idea at all. We haven’t come to bother them. But we thought they ought to know we are married, and we want advice.”

“I’m sure they’ll help,” Nanta exclaimed. “They always help everybody. But I still don’t understand. Why don’t they know? Was it in a great hurry? Won’t you sit down and have some tea?”—remembering her duties suddenly. “I’m sure you want it.” She rang the bell. “Have you come a long way?”

“Only from Glasgow.” Bill smiled at her. “But we’re quite ready for tea.”

“Tea would be lovely!” Patricia sighed. “We’ve really come by train from London, Lady Rosalind. We came from Glasgow yesterday; we had an early wedding, and we caught the afternoon train. We had the night in London, at a nice little hotel Bill knew.”

“You must be very tired. I’m sure being married is exciting, and then to come all the way to London, on the same day——!”

“We didn’t seem to notice the journey very much,” Patricia acknowledged. “But it’s all been such a rush. We’ll tell you; we’d like to.”

“Wait till you’ve had some tea,” and Nanta shyly took her place at the table, dismissing the maid who had brought the tray. “Please help yourselves! Hand those sandwiches to Mrs. Kane.”

Bill supplied his wife’s wants, and then stood and looked down at his hostess. “But we’re cousins. I’m Bill; my wife is Patricia, or more often just Patch. Can’t you forget ‘Lieutenant and Mrs. Kane’, Cousin Rosalind?”

“Oh, please, Lady Rosalind! Please adopt us!” Patricia cried.

“Not unless you adopt me too,” Nanta said firmly. “I don’t like being called Lady Rosalind. We didn’t know about it till a few years ago, and then we didn’t want it and we called ourselves just ‘Rose’. My eldest sister was Miss Rose; I was Nanta Rose, because my

second name is Atalanta. My other sisters were Mandy Rose and Minty Rose. If we're to be cousins you must play fair and drop that 'Lady Rosalind'. It sounds stiff and unfriendly. Aunt Rosamund calls me Rosalind, but I'd much rather be just Nanta."

Patricia gazed at her, eager-eyed. "You ran away from your titles? I don't blame you! I'd hate to have one dumped on me!"

"We hated it. We hadn't grown up to be used to it. We were living in a cottage in the country, and it would have seemed silly to call ourselves 'Lady'. Am I really to call you Bill?" She looked at the tall sailor. "I know now who you are. If Hugh and Geoff and Roddy weren't here you'd be the next Lord Kentisbury, wouldn't you?"

"Correct," Bill admitted. "I'm more than thankful Hugh and Geoff and Roddy are here, I've no time for the responsibilities of Kentisbury, and neither has Patch. I've seen Roddy; I don't know the others yet."

"You must see them, when Aunt Rosamund comes back. She'll want to show them to you herself." Nanta looked at Patricia. "She's very proud of the boys and the double twins. We must wait till she comes."

"We will so!" Patch agreed. "It's a kind idea. I'm dying to see them all."

"Are you really called Patch?"

"Usually," Patricia gave her a friendly grin. "But Patch Kane sounds rather awful, so I'd better be Patricia now."

"Patricia Kane; the most wonderful name in the world," Bill said exuberantly. "And it's yours, my girl. By gum, I can't believe it!"

"I can hardly believe it," Patch admitted. "It feels very odd. Did it feel very odd to turn into Lady Rosalind, after being—what was it? Something Rose."

"Nanta Rose. Please call me Nanta! It feels still more odd to be doing this."

"Doing what? Pouring out cups of beautiful tea?"

Bill understood. "Acting as hostess for Kentisbury Castle. Is that it?"

"That's it," Nanta told him. "I feel horribly shy."

"You don't show it," Patch said warmly. "You're a lovely hostess. Were you frightened when we arrived?"

"Terrified," Nanta confessed, but she smiled shyly as she spoke. "Now, please, won't you tell me? I'm sure there's a story. Why doesn't Aunt Rosamund know you are married? What about invitations and wedding presents? You tell me!" and she looked at Patch.

"I'm longing to tell you," Patch assured her. "You've been so terribly kind," and she launched forth into her story.

CHAPTER XVI

PATCH TELLS HER STORY

"I was all alone in Glasgow," Patch said breathlessly. "I was feeling simply awful, and like an ass I wrote and told Bill. We've been engaged for years, and it seemed the only thing to do. I never imagined he could do anything about it, but I felt better after I'd told him. The next thing I knew he was on the doorstep, saying if I didn't marry him on the spot he'd throw up the Navy and stay at home."

Bill looked at their hostess with laughing eyes. "But why was she all alone in Glasgow? You've begun at the end, Red Patch."

"I had a baby brother," Patch said hurriedly. "My mother died, and I left college in Glasgow—I was eighteen then; I'm twenty-three now—and stayed at home to take care of Jackie. We had a nurse, but I couldn't have him brought up by a nurse. He was my boy, and I loved looking after him; I was terrifically keen, though I knew I'd have to give him up some day, when I married Bill. I had Jackie for five years; then my father married again, and the new mother was fond of children and said she'd bring up Jackie now. So I'd lost him, and I had nothing left." She looked at Nanta with bright tragic eyes.

"Didn't it almost break your heart?" Nanta cried.

"I felt like it. I went back to college; there seemed nothing else to do. But I couldn't work; I was reading history, and it just didn't seem to matter. I couldn't stick to it; I was thinking all the time about Jackie and wondering if she'd take care of him properly and—and if he missed me too badly." Her voice broke, but she pulled herself up with an effort. "I'm an ass! It's better for him, and he'll soon forget. I couldn't have stayed with him till he was ready for school."

"Rather not! You knew I wanted you." Bill took his turn. "Cousin Nanta—is that right? It's a duck of a little name! We're not as crazy as we sound. If I were a penniless bloke I grant you it would have been mad to rush Patch into marrying me, but I'm not. An ancient aunt left me her fortune, and it's invested and piling up interest; I'm not using much of it just now. I couldn't buy a house and settle Miss Paterson in it"—his eyes danced—"but I can buy a little house for Mrs. Kane. I can give my wife a home of her own. Knowing that, could I leave her messing about and miserable in digs in Glasgow? I ask you—could I?"

"Of *course*, you couldn't!" Nanta said. "You had to do something, and you had plenty of money. You had to give it to her."

"And I had to marry her so that I could do it." Bill summed up the matter. "Gosh! I hope Cousin Rosamund will see it as quickly as you did! I'm a bit nervous of her and my lord, and Patch is plain frightened of them both."

"Scared stiff," Patricia shivered. "I've met Lady Kentisbury, but only once, when she was on holiday in Scotland. She knew we were engaged, but I'm afraid she'll scold us for getting married like this. I'm terrified of her! You can't think what a relief it was to find somebody who wasn't at all frightening!"

"Just a school kid playing at being grown-up." Nanta helped her out.

"Oh, you're not! Are you really?"

"I'm going back to school for one more term, as a Cookery student. I've had two years, but I haven't worked very hard," Nanta confessed. "Everybody says one more term won't hurt

me. But never mind that. I'm sure you needn't be frightened of Aunt Rosamund; she's kinder than kind, and she always knows the right thing to do. We were afraid of her once, but that was because we'd run away and refused to be friends."

"You felt guilty," Patch said. "That's how we feel now."

"She'll understand. Are you going to buy a house for—for Patch?" Nanta looked at Bill.

"Sure thing. That's the idea. But we want advice. I thought we might find some little place near here, so that the family could keep an eye on her. She might want somebody, some day."

Patch coloured suddenly. "I'm not too keen on being near home, because of the stepmother."

"Aunt Rosamund will help. Tell me about your wedding!" Nanta begged. "Was it all done in a great hurry? Didn't you have bridesmaids and presents?"

"A few presents, and two bridesmaids." Patch gladly put aside the thought of the next interview to be faced. "My sister Collie—Colina, you know—and Rosalin Macdonald, our chum, were my maids, and we——"

"Rosalin? One of the elder twins here is called Rosalin," Nanta exclaimed.

"There's a family connection," Bill said. "Rosalin in Scotland is a distant relation of small Rosalin, in Kentisbury."

"We searched Glasgow for white frocks," Patch went on. "I wired for Collie and Rosalin to come, and Bill said we must wear white, so we ran up and down Sauchiehall Street demanding wedding garments."

"You couldn't wear anything but white, with your lovely hair! Is your sister like you?"

"No, she's the Irish side of the family; black hair and very blue eyes. And Rosalin's hair is golden; we were a gaudy trio. We found a wedding-dress, and white frocks for the girls, and Bill was satisfied."

"You looked a fair treat, all three of you," Bill said. "Was it only yesterday? Seems a week ago!"

"Father and the stepmother came up to Glasgow, and we were married early and had a meal together at an hotel, and then Bill and I rushed off to the London train and left Collie and Rosalin to clear up the mess. They're at college, going in for gym work; Collie will be a perfect gym and games mistress."

"Young Rosalin's rather half-hearted about it," Bill scoffed. "She wanted to go with Collie. But as she'll certainly marry Patricia's cousin Roger some day, it doesn't matter."

"Then she'll be your cousin." Nanta looked at Patch. "Are they engaged?"

"They're walking out," Patch said gravely. "Roger's doing medicine, and he still has a long way to go. But some day they'll marry—we're all sure of that; and Rosalin will settle down with him here. Oh, we didn't explain! Roger's dad, my uncle, is the Kentisbury doctor, Dr. Black. That's why we're all pals. I came to stay with Roger and Uncle when I was sixteen, and I met Bill, who was staying here."

"And that was that," Bill said. "There never was any other girl for me, once I'd seen my Bright Red Patch. Roger was the same about Rosalin; he wants her all right. If Aunt Rosamund hoofs Patch and me out we shall go and stay with her uncle in the town."

"Oh, she won't! She'll want you to stay."

"Is Tansy here?" Patch asked.

Nanta looked her astonishment at the question. "Tansy Lillico, the housekeeper's niece, do you mean?"

"I do so. She was one of our gang in the old days. Bill has to break it to her that Roger's keen on Rosalin. He used to be Tansy's pal, so the sooner she knows the better."

"She's in London, at college," Nanta said. "But she doesn't want to marry anybody. She's training to take her aunt's place as housekeeper, and she wouldn't go away. She's very keen; I've talked to her, when she's been home for holidays. She won't leave Kentisbury."

"Good!" Bill said. "That's how we hoped it would be. Then Roger won't break her heart by forsaking her for Rosalin Macdonald."

"I'm sure he won't. But I'm forgetting to say all the proper things," and Nanta became the complete hostess again. "Have you had enough tea? Then wouldn't you like to wash, after your journey? I'll take you up to my room," to Patricia. "Can you find a bathroom? You know your way, don't you?" to Bill.

"This was Rhoda's bedroom," Patch said, when they went upstairs. "She used to bring me here to change, after we'd been riding. Where is she now? I had an invitation to her wedding, but it was too far to go."

"She lives in London. She's just had a baby girl, Sonia Rose."

"That's pretty! And Bill's sister Rosalie is married and has one too, hasn't she?"

"Her baby is Tamzine Rose; they both called their girls for Aunt Rosamund. I don't know, either of them very well, but I have seen them. Rhoda met her husband in India, on her trip round the world, after the little earl died. Rosalie wasn't old enough then, but she went to stay with a school friend, Daffodil Trenow, and presently she married a Trenow cousin, and her baby is called for his sister Tamzine, who was at school with Rhoda and Rosalie."

"Jolly names! I was glad to hear they were married." Patch was combing out her glowing curls. "*How* I'd like to have a baby of my own! Rosalie's a year younger than I am, but she's beaten me."

Nanta gave her a quick shy look. "Oh, but you will have one soon, won't you?"

"Can't tell. I'd love it and so would Bill. He says"—and she grinned—"that if we have one it will probably be two, as twins seem to run in his family. I don't think I want two, but I would like to have one, to make up for losing Jackie. One of our own would be even better than a baby brother. There! I can't change, till we know what Lady Kentisbury wants us to do, but I'm tidier than I was."

"Do you always wear green? It suits you." Nanta studied the neat travelling costume with approval.

"I like green. I suppose you wear blue," with a glance at Nanta's deep blue dress, which matched her eyes.

"I want to go and say good-night to all the twins." Nanta looked at the clock. "Will you mind if I leave you for a few minutes? I'd love to take you to see them, but I know Aunt Rosamund would be disappointed if she didn't show them to you herself."

"Only take me back to Bill!" Patch laughed. "I'd never find him if I tried to go alone. I'd be lost in this huge place; I want a map! Oh, we must wait for Lady Kentisbury to show us the babies! That's only fair. But I want to see them very badly."

CHAPTER XVII

LIEUTENANT AND MRS. KANE

“Do you live here?” Patch asked.

Nanta had come back from her visit to the nurseries and they were chatting beside the fire. “Oh no!” she explained. “My sister Virginia has a house in Wiltshire, and I’ve a baby niece, Nancy Rose, who is a perfect darling. I’m going there for the holidays, but she and Gilbert are on their way home from Italy, so Aunt Rosamund asked me—there’s the car. She’ll be here in a moment.”

She saw the look that shot from Patch to Bill and felt the sudden tension in them both. “She’ll be kind,” she faltered. “She couldn’t be anything else.” But she knew they had not heard.

The door had been left ajar and they heard Rosamund’s voice. “Lieutenant and Mrs. Kane?” and a pause.

“She’s wondering who Lieutenant and Mrs. Kane are, as I did,” Nanta thought.

“Lady Rosalind is with them, my lady——”

“Yes. I will go to them in a moment. But first send Nurse to me in the library.”

“Aunt Rosamund must ask about Baby Geoff and the others before she has time for anybody else,” Nanta said. “But they’re all right; Nanny will give her a good report.”

Lieutenant and Mrs. Kane were not listening. Patch drew closer to Bill and his arm slipped round her.

“Leave it to me, my girl,” he growled. “I’ll see you through.”

Then the door opened, the light flashed on, and Rosamund stood looking at them.

Patch sprang up, her red curls flaming in the sudden light. But Bill was before her. “Cousin Rosamund, I’ve brought my wife.”

“Bill! How could you? I thought you were going to wait?” There was reproach in the Countess’s tone.

“I’ve waited five years,” Bill began.

“We’re not mad! There was a reason! Oh, Lady Kentisbury, please be kind!” Patch cried.

“They had to do it, Aunt Rosamund,” Nanta added.

Rosamund gave her a swift smile. “Have you been a good deputy for me?”

“She’s been a lovely hostess. She’s done everything and been so very kind,” Patch exclaimed.

“Good! I’ll hear what Bill has to say for himself before I blame you too much. But we didn’t expect this, you know. I suppose you’ve had tea? Well, I haven’t—at least, only a very early cup. Rosalind, will you give me tea, while Bill explains?”

Colouring shyly, Nanta took her place at the tray which was presently brought in. Bill sprang up to wait on the Countess, and then, urged by her, told his story.

Patch would have helped, but Rosamund checked her. “Let Bill speak. You can add your bit afterwards.”

She looked thoughtful when she understood. “Yes, I see how you felt. I know what it would have meant to me, if anyone had snatched Roddy from me! I have brought up my little half-brother,” and she looked at Patch. “I couldn’t have borne to lose him. I forgive you; it wasn’t as unreasonable as I thought at first.”

“It was when he said he’d give up the Navy, if I didn’t marry him, that I gave in and agreed to do it in a hurry. He really meant it,” Patch cried.

Rosamund nodded. “You couldn’t allow that. How did you manage about leave?” She turned to Bill.

“Patch knocked me all to pieces with her letter,” he said frankly. “I kept seeing her in digs in Glasgow, when I’d been thinking of her out on the hills or in her canoe on the loch. I knew she was eating her heart out for Jackie, with no hope of ever having him again. I just couldn’t bear it. My work went all to bits—I couldn’t settle to anything—I forgot things and made a mess of everything.”

“How lovely of you, Bill!” Patch cried.

Bill grinned. “I couldn’t help it, my girl. At last the skipper had me up and asked what was wrong with me. I told him my girl was in a jam and I couldn’t forget her, and he had the whole story out of me. We were in the Mediterranean and he sent me off in a hurry. He said: ‘Take two weeks’ leave. Marry the girl and give her something new to think about. If she marries you, I’ll give you an extension, two weeks more.’ It took three planes to get me home to Patch! I flew from Marseilles to Paris—Paris to London—on to Glasgow. I wired the skipper as soon as we fixed the date. He’s a jolly old bird and he wired back, giving me the extra time as a wedding-gift.”

“He sounds a jolly old bird,” Rosamund said, with a laugh. “And you were married yesterday?”

“Yesterday morning, in Glasgow. I’ve two weeks more at home.”

Rosamund looked at Patch. “You poor child! What are you going to do when he goes?”

Patch caught her breath. “I don’t know. Oh, you are kind! But I have to get used to it. I’m a sailor’s wife. He has to go.”

“Bravely spoken! We must help you,” Rosamund said briskly. “What are your plans?”

Together Lieutenant and Mrs. Kane told of the little house to be found, near Kentisbury, if possible.

“Oh, certainly! Patricia must have friends near her. But will she be happy, all alone in a new little house? Won’t she be very lonely?”

Patch looked at her doubtfully. “I think perhaps I will.”

Bill’s face fell. “But that’s the whole idea!—to give her a house of her own. Isn’t that what every girl wants when she marries?”

“Yes, if she has her husband coming home every night. She keeps the house nice for him, cooks for him, plans to go out with him, tells him all she has been doing. But it won’t be like that for Patricia. Her little house will be all new and clean and fresh; it will be fun getting it ready, but once that is done what is she going to do with herself?”

Bill looked at Patch. “Will you go melancholy mad in a month? I’d better stay at home to cheer you up.”

“I’m not trying to discourage you,” Rosamund said soberly. “But I want you to think this out carefully. If a little house is the best thing I’ll help you to find one, and if Patricia asks me I’ll help with furnishing and so on. But once that’s all over, won’t she be bored to tears? What will she do? A little tennis, a little gardening, tea-parties with neighbours, books from the library; will that be enough? She looks too young and energetic to spend her life in small social duties.”

Very crestfallen, Bill groaned, “I guess you’re right. But what else can she do?”

Patch, with flushed cheeks, was gazing at the fire.

Rosamund glanced at her. "Do you two hope to have a family some day?" she asked bluntly.

"Oh yes, please! We want it very much," Patch cried.

"What you ought to have done, when you lost your brother, wasn't history, but babies," Rosamund scolded. "You were going to be married. History and a degree were no use to you. You ought to have gone to college, as my young nurses have done, for training in child welfare and baby craft."

"I never thought of that!" Patch cried. "Oh, Bill, unmarry me, and I'll go back to school!"

"I'll marry you harder than ever, my girl. You won't escape me now," Bill grinned.

"There's no need for any unmarrying. Mrs. Kane can go to college quite as well as Miss Paterson," Rosamund said. "Nanny would tell you all about it. You could put off finding your house and have a year at college; it would be really useful to you."

"I'd love it! I'd like to know how to do things properly, in case——" Patch paused.

"Of course. But I'm not sure that even college is quite what you want. To help in a babies' home or crèche might be better. You don't need certificates, but you do want experience, under trained people who know their job. You want to be with babies and children of all ages, for a while, not to learn theories in classrooms."

"But could I do that? I'd enjoy it, but where could I go?"

"We'll think it over. You may be wiser to postpone that little house. Don't look so worried, Bill! I won't interfere, if you feel you must see her settled in her own home before you leave her."

"That's what I want to do," Bill admitted.

"We'll discuss it later. I must go to my neglected baby; the poor little chap has been missing me. Have you seen the family, Patricia?"

"Lady Nanta wouldn't let us see them. She said we must wait for you to show them to us."

Rosamund smiled at her niece. "That was kind and thoughtful! Then come and have a look at our crowd."

"Well, I say! Are you going to keep us for the night?" Bill demanded. "We left our bags at the station, in case you flung us out."

"You ridiculous children! How very absurd! We'll send for your things. You can do something for me, right now, Bill."

"Sure! What is it?" Bill asked, with enthusiasm.

"Talk to Roddy. Tell him all about ships and the sea—everything!"

"That's a big order," Bill grinned. "Is he for the Navy?"

"He's very keen. Tell him all you can. He usually has half-an-hour with me about this time, but I must see to Geoff, so you can take Roddy off my hands, for once."

"I don't know how to talk to small kids," Bill began.

"You won't need to know; you won't have time to think. Roddy will pour out questions at you. Patricia, you and I will go to see the babies."

"We're leaving Lady Nanta out," Patch ventured.

Rosamund laughed. "She may come too. We'll send Roddy to talk to Bill. But why this 'Lady Nanta' business? Her name is Rosalind."

"Oh, that's far too difficult, Cousin Rosamund!" Bill said promptly. "We'd get mixed every time between Cousin Rosalind and Cousin Rosamund!"

"Please let them call me Nanta! But I'd rather they left out the 'Lady' bit," Nanta pleaded.

“Perhaps it is confusing,” Rosamund admitted. “Other people have thought so. You may call her Nanta, then. Come along, girls, and see the family.”

CHAPTER XVIII

NANTA PLANS FOR PATCH

“This is the girls’ dormitory.” Rosamund smiled at Patch. “The twins are all girls, two sets; Rosabel and Rosalin, Rosanna and Rosilda. The tinies call themselves Zanna and Zilda.”

“Oh! Oh, what lovely children!” Patch crept to one after another of the four little beds, each holding a small fair-haired sleeping girl.

“They’re nice, aren’t they?” Nanta whispered. “These are the bigger ones, but there isn’t much difference now.”

“No, the tinies are catching up on Big Twins,” Rosamund agreed. “It’s rather like a boarding-school, isn’t it?”

“They’re adorable! They’re gey bonnie,” Patch murmured. “And all so much alike!”

“The family likeness is very strong. Come and peep at Hugh, next door; Geoffrey Hugh, Lord Verriton.”

“What a lovely boy!” Patch whispered, as they looked down at the five-year-old heir to Kentisbury. “Aren’t you very proud?”

“We are, rather,” Rosamund admitted. “And we have a second boy now; that’s a great satisfaction. I must go and attend to his wants. You shall see him, for one moment, before he wakes for his supper.”

“He’s exactly like all the rest,” Patch marvelled, gazing at the tiny baby in the cradle.

“Roddy is just the same. And look at Rosalind! She might be their big sister.”

“You’re all just alike. But you couldn’t be her mother.”

“That’s true.” Rosamund lifted the sleeping baby in her arms; he murmured and nuzzled against her, and she laughed. “He wants me to himself. Run along and help Bill with Roddy! Nanny, this is Mrs. Bill Kane; her husband came to see Roddy, before we had any family of our own.”

Nanny followed the girls from the room. “My lady likes to be left alone with her baby. I remember seeing your husband years ago, Mrs. Kane.”

Patch looked at her, bright-eyed. “I’ve been Mrs. Kane for less than two days, Nanny. This is a sort of honeymoon.”

“Dearie me! I hope you’ll be very happy, I’m sure.”

“Will you tell me about the college where they train girls to take care of babies? Lady Kentisbury said we’d ask you.”

Nanny gave her a quick look. “I’ll tell you anything I can. Our girls, Molly—or Hyacinth, as my lady calls her—and May, whom she calls Lilac, both came from there.”

“Why are they called those odd names?”

“I can tell you,” Nanta said, and described the Hamlet Club and its Queens. “Hyacinth and Lilac were Queens, and of course Aunt Rosamund was one, a long while ago.”

Patch looked at her with interest. “And you? Weren’t you a Queen too?”

“I am the Queen, until May-Day,” Nanta said, with dignity. “I’m the Lavender Queen.”

“Oh, congratulations! I’m sure you’ve been a nice one.”

“You’d better stay with Aunt Rosamund and come and watch the coronation on May-Day. You’d see us all dressed up.” Nanta gave a swift thought to Tessa and her difficult crowning, but said nothing more. “Nanny and Hyacinth could tell you all you want to know about

babies,” she added, as Nanny left them and went into the “girls’ dormitory.” “Why don’t you stay here and let them teach you?”

Patch gave her a startled look. “Oh, I couldn’t dump myself here! I’d be a bother to them.”

“I should think you’d be very useful. Ask Aunt Rosamund if you could help Nanny.”

“She couldn’t be so kind! I couldn’t ask her!”

“I know you could. You’d like Hyacinth and Lilac; all our Queens have been nice. Come and see how Roddy’s getting on!”

They crept into the room where Roddy, a fair-haired lad of eight, was bombarding Bill with questions.

“Poor Bill!” Patch murmured. “We won’t interrupt; the small boy’s having the time of his life, and Bill seems quite able to cope with him.”

“It’s just what Roddy has been wanting; a real live sailor to tell him things. He’s having a lovely time,” Nanta agreed.

Bill grinned at them, but gave his whole attention to the questions which poured from the future Admiral of the Fleet, which Roddy meant to be some day.

Rosamund returned presently, and sent Roddy off to bed, promising that Cousin Bill would tell him more in the morning.

Roddy went regretfully, but obediently. “More in the morning, please, Cousin Bill!”

“Fine little chap!” Bill said yearningly. “By gum! Fancy having one like that of your own!”

“Oh, but we want a little girl!” Patch cried.

“You may have both, some day. I don’t mean both at once!” as Patch shook her head vehemently. “That doesn’t seem to run in the family; our twins are all identicals. But you ought to have a Roddy of your own, to send into the Navy. We’ll talk of your affairs after dinner, for which nobody is going to change to-night,” Rosamund said, with authority. “It’s almost ready, so we’ll leave our problems till afterwards.”

As they sat round the fire later in the evening, the Countess turned to Patch. “You’ve had an idea. I’ve seen it in your face all through dinner. Out with it! Is it something that will help?”

Patch gave a frightened gasp. “I can’t! It would be too marvellous. But I couldn’t ask you.”

“What’s up, my girl?” Bill demanded. “You ought to tell me your marvellous ideas!”

“It was Lady Nanta’s plan. I couldn’t have thought of anything so wonderful.”

“Dear, dear!” Rosamund exclaimed. “What is this marvellous plan?”

But Patch, overwhelmed with diffidence, shook her head helplessly.

Rosamund looked at her niece. “What is it, Rosalind?”

“She should stay here and learn about babies from Nanny and Hyacinth and Lilac,” Nanta said simply.

“Gosh! That would be super-marvellous!” Bill cried. “But I agree with Patch. We couldn’t dump her on you!”

“I had the same idea myself, while I was nursing Geoff,” the Countess said calmly. “But I wasn’t sure if it would appeal to Patricia. It means postponing her own house, for the present. But we could give her the experience she wants; children of all ages provided, from eight weeks to eight years! Nanny is fully qualified, and she would be glad of more help; our second nurse, Agatha, is leaving us to be married. I’ve another youngster coming from

college, but she has only just started her course. If Patricia would care to give up college and come to us for training, we could give her all she needs.”

“By gum!” Bill used his favourite expression. “If I could leave her at Kentisbury I’d have an easy mind about her! You worried me by saying she’d be bored and lonely.”

Rosamund looked at Patricia. “Rosalind’s idea seems to me excellent. How do you really feel about it?”

“I’d like it better than anything in the world! But only if you’ll let me come as a very humble junior nurse,” Patch said earnestly. “I’d want to live in the nursery with your other girls and give all my time to the children. I couldn’t come if you were going to treat me as a visitor and just send me to talk to Nanny sometimes. I should feel I *had* dumped myself on you! But if I could be really useful, I’d love it.”

“Well, well! If I insist on making you one of the family, I suppose I shall scare you off. Perhaps you’ll come to tea with me sometimes,” Rosamund said laughing. “We’ll talk to Nanny. She and the girls will welcome you, and the children will call you Auntie Patch. Will that do?”

“I’ll love to be Auntie Patch! But it’s too good to be true!”

Rosamund looked at Bill. “Give her a cheque-book and a bank account. Then if she suddenly wants her own house we’ll find one for her, and she can buy it and settle down. But for a few months leave her with us. She’ll have a good time with our children and they’ll love her.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Patch faltered. “It’s better than anything I could have dreamed of. To stay in this lovely place!”

“I could kiss you, Cousin Rosamund!” Bill cried, with enthusiasm.

“Oh, don’t bother! The giving won’t be all on one side; we can do with more help. I’ll be glad to have Auntie Patch here. Now I’ve one thing to say! As the future doesn’t need to be given up to house-hunting, what about a honeymoon? Two weeks for you two alone somewhere?”

“Yes!” Bill shouted. “Where shall we go, Patch, my girl?”

Patch shook her head. “It’s too kind. I’ve no words left.”

“What about Vairy?” asked the Countess.

“You *couldn’t* let us go *there!*” Patch gasped.

“The place on earth we’re keenest on,” Bill cried. “Vairy! Oh, rather! I’m on! A honeymoon at Vairy! Oh, Cousin Rosamund, do you really mean it?”

“Our honeymoon couples always go to Vairy.” Rosamund smiled at his excitement. “Rosalind’s three sisters have all been there. I’ll wire to Mrs. Colquhoun to expect you.”

“Don’t tell her who we are!” Bill pleaded. “Say ‘Lieutenant and Mrs. Kane!’ She’ll have the shock of her life when Patch walks in.”

“But why? I don’t understand,” Nanta asked, puzzled. “Have you been to Vairy before?”

“Have we? Patch, my girl, have we been to Vairy? Have we been trapped in an underground cellar for hours? Have we discovered the secrets of Vairy? Did we find a treasure? And were we frightened?”

Patch looked at Nanta. “We had an adventure at Vairy, when we were seventeen—before we were engaged.”

“Before you were engaged,” Bill corrected her. “I’d been engaged to you for quite a long while.”

Patch coloured and laughed. "We found all sorts of things, and we were terribly frightened because some old papers seemed to show that Bill ought to be the Earl of Kentisbury. We hated the idea; I said I wouldn't marry him if he had to be an earl."

"I don't wonder!" Nanta said fervently. "But it wasn't true?"

"No, it was all right. We didn't have to make a fearful fuss and scandal. And was I glad!"

"You didn't have to turn us out of the Castle," Rosamund agreed. "They found a lovely Kentisbury collar of emeralds. Patricia ought to have worn it at her wedding."

"That's the one thing about our wedding that worried me," Bill confessed. "But there was no time to fetch the dog-collar. And I didn't want to tell you till I could introduce Patch as my wife."

"You're very proud of your wife," Rosamund commented. "I shan't be satisfied till I've seen Patricia wearing those emeralds. When you come back from Vairy, you must give us a day or two before you rejoin your ship, and I'll give a dinner-party for her and you shall show her off—wearing the emeralds—to our friends. Of course, you must wear them, child!" as Patch cried out in protest. "Did you have a white frock for the wedding? Then you won't want anything else; with the emeralds, and your pretty hair, you'll look a picture. But you can't wear the jewels in the afternoon, so you must have a dance or a dinner, and the dinner will be simpler. Don't be shy! You'll have to meet our friends, if you stay here, for they come to tea and bring babies to play with our tribe. I have godchildren in all the families: Dorothy Rose Robertson, Jillian Rose Raymond, Maidlin Rose Quellyn, Barbara Rose Marchwood, Shirley Rose Everett. I shall certainly give a dinner for you and the emeralds! We'll fetch Rosalind from Summertown for one night, so that she can see how lovely you look in them."

Patch looked at Bill in anguished protest, but Bill basely betrayed her trust. "I'm looking forward to that party! I want to see her wear our collar, just once."

Rosamund looked at Patch. "You may want to wear it some day, after he has gone; some occasion might arise, and you wouldn't care to wear the collar unless Bill had given it to you himself and seen you wear it for the first time."

"I wouldn't feel it was mine," Patch admitted. "He's only said he'll give it to me some day."

"My dinner-party is the day on which he'll give it to you. After that you'll feel it is really yours."

"Cousin Rosamund, how very clever you are!" Bill exclaimed.

"I shall have trouble with my husband over this nursery business," Rosamund remarked. "He won't like it. He'll say Bill's young wife must be one of the family. But I'll talk to him. If Patricia comes to tea with us quite often and appears at an occasional dinner-party, that may console him. Now I'm going to send you children off to bed. I'm tired, if you're not—but I expect you are. You've had two very full days," and she smiled at Patch. "You must start early to-morrow—after keeping your promise to Roddy! We're very strict here about obedience, but we're also very careful to be fair to the children. You'd better get up to town for lunch and do your banking business and any shopping you want; remember you can't get anything at Vairy! Then have a night at your small hotel and go north in the morning."

"We'll take the night train and be there by the morning," Bill said joyfully. "We'll catch the early boat to Vairy. Tell Mrs. Colquhoun we'll arrive about eleven. I'll take you out on the loch in the afternoon, Patch, my girl."

"Don't drown yourselves! Oh, I forgot!"—as Bill laughed. "You'll be all right, I suppose."

“But oughtn’t we to wait to see Lord Kentisbury?” Patch suggested doubtfully. “Won’t he think us very rude?”

“I’ll explain. He wouldn’t want you to lose a whole day of your holiday. And he’ll be tired; I shall want him to rest. I’ll tell him the whole story, and you’ll see him when you come back.”

“Good!” Bill said. “Give him our love! We’ll talk to Roddy, and we’ll run round to Patch’s uncle for a few minutes and give him a nasty shock, and then we’ll be off.”

“Why a nasty shock?” Patch demanded.

“Well, a big shock,” Bill grinned. “He doesn’t know you’re married. But I don’t think he’ll object.”

“Is that Dr. Black?” Rosamund asked. “I keep forgetting Patricia’s connection with Kentisbury, though I had heard of it, of course. Yes, you must spare a few moments for him.”

“We were going to make him give us a bed, if you flung us out,” Bill explained.

“Silly!” said Rosamund. “For that you shall be sent to bed at once. Patricia, my dear, let me know if you want anything. Rosalind, thank you for looking after these two for me!”

“She did it beautifully,” Patch said. “She’s a lovely hostess. You could leave the Castle in her charge quite safely.”

“Oh, please don’t!” Nanta cried. “You don’t know how frightened I was!”

“I’m sure you didn’t show it,” Rosamund said, as she led them off to bed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CROWNING OF TESSA

As she drove to Summerton two days later, Nanta was full of new thoughts. She had been only fifteen when Virginia had met Gilbert, and had been young for her age; she had watched their love-story with sympathy but without much understanding. It had been nice for Virginia to know Gilbert was so fond of her; it would be jolly for her to go and live in his lovely house. That was how their romance had appeared to Nanta.

But now she was nineteen, and at Kentisbury and at the Abbey she had seen many happily married couples; her mind had grown and broadened and she thought more deeply. She had watched Patch and Bill with great liking and sympathy.

"It must be rather wonderful to care for somebody like that! And still more wonderful to feel somebody cares so much for you. They'll have a lovely time together in Scotland, but it will be awful for them when he has to go. I think he ought to stay at home, now that they're married."

She had said it to Rosamund, when the young couple had gone. But Rosamund had not agreed. "Not yet. He'll give up the Navy and stay at home some day, but not till he has found something to do. After that busy life he wouldn't be happy doing nothing. He must think of some job before he gives up his work. And if he stayed at home now Auntie Patch would feel it was her fault and that she had spoiled his career. As she said so pluckily, she's a sailor's wife and she knows it means separation. It will be hard for them both, but they're brave and they'll bear it."

Nanta told the story to Virginia, as they enjoyed the tulips at Summerton or played with Nancy Rose and Nancy Sue, and she thought much of these new friends whom she had met so unexpectedly, and went eagerly to Kentisbury for the promised dinner-party, anxious to see Patricia again.

There was a subtle change in Patch. Nanta was conscious of it, but found it altogether an improvement. Patch was no longer frightened; her future was settled, at least for a time; the dread of her reception at the Castle was gone and her position there was decided. The happy days of solitude with Bill had soothed and reassured her, and she wore the beautiful emerald collar with a new poise and confidence. Bill's wedding gift had been an emerald star, which she wore on her red curls, and Joy and Ivor Quellyn, Joan and Jack Raymond, Jen and Kenneth Marchwood, and Maidlin and Jock Robertson, looked with delight on the new member of Rosamund's family.

"She's lovely, isn't she, Lady Joy?" Nanta murmured.

"Bill's lucky. She's beautiful, in that white frock," said Jen. "Marvellous hair!"

"A highly ornamental addition to our circle," Lord Kentisbury remarked to Jack Raymond. "I like the child, and Rosamund is in love with her already."

"Is this their last night together?" Joan asked quietly of her hostess. "Poor young things! It's good of them to give it up to us."

"But don't you think it's better?" Rosamund asked. "If you people weren't here they'd mope and hold hands in corners. They won't sleep, I'm afraid; once they're alone, Patricia will break down. But she's keeping up bravely; she'll come through all right. Bill will have his work to keep him from thinking; he's flying to Marseilles, so he'll soon be back in harness."

And I can trust Nanta to keep Patch from brooding; she's going to send Lilac and Hyacinth out to-morrow and demand Patricia's help. With Big Twins and the tinies on her hands, she'll have no time to think."

"Will Nanta play to us after dinner? I love her music."

"I asked her to bring the fiddle. She's always willing to play."

"But I didn't know you were a genius!" Patch cried, when Nanta had played. "You never told us, when we saw you before!"

"Oh, I'm not! I play a little, that's all. But it is the thing I care about most."

"I should think so, when you can play like that!"

"Play 'Heartsease,' and four of us will stroll through it, Nanta Rose," Jen coaxed.

"In the Great Hall," Rosamund said.

Nanta lifted her fiddle and the square for four moved quietly through the country-dance.

"Now 'Maid in the Moon,' and Ivor or Jock will play," Jen commanded. "There couldn't be anything quieter. I'm quite sure Rosamund has all the music! Nanta Rose will be my woman. Are you a dancer, Mrs. Kane?"

"Yes, but Scottish dances," Patch smiled. "I taught Bill the Eightsome Reel long ago. I love watching your dances; you do them so beautifully."

"We've been dancing since we were infants. You must teach us your reels and strathspeys," Rosamund said.

"We have country-dances, but they're different from yours. We have one called 'Princess Royal,'" and Patch smiled at Bill.

"Really?" Jen exclaimed. "How odd! You should see Joan dance our 'Princess Royal!' I suppose you wouldn't, Joan darling?"

"Not to-night," Joan said firmly. "Mrs. Kane should come with Rosamund on May-Day and see the dancing at school."

"I've been invited. I want to see Lady Nanta crown the new Queen," Patch said.

"And be crowned with forget-me-nots. They'll suit Nanta Rose," Jen remarked.

"You could dance 'Hey, Boys' or 'Ruffy,'" and Nanta took up her violin again. "You can do them quietly. And 'Hit and Miss', Jen."

"If Hyacinth and Lilac would come down, we could have 'Hunsdon House'," Jen suggested. "Can't we have them, Ros?"

"They wouldn't like it. They aren't dressed for dancing. We won't tease them," Rosamund said. "We'll have the squares for four, since our lazy men won't trouble to learn the dances. Thank you, Rosalind! And Maid shall sing one or two little songs to us."

A week later Patch sat in a corner of the school hall, greatly intrigued to see Lady Kentisbury wearing a crimson robe and a wreath of red roses, and Nanta in a shimmering train of lavender; and even more to find Hyacinth and Lilac, with whom she had worked in the nurseries, dressed as Queens, Hyacinth in soft pastel shades of pink and blue, with a wreath of blue and pink hyacinths, and Lilac carrying branches of her name flower, forced on in the Kentisbury greenhouses, and wearing a pretty train in two shades of lilac, with white flowers scattered on the edge.

Here, too, were the friends who had come to dinner; Joy in bright green, Jen in beech brown, Joan in violet, and small Maidlin Robertson in primrose, with her nurse, Nesta, or Queen Honesty, in silver, crowned with shining honesty seed-pods.

"It's a marvellous idea," Patch said to herself. "No wonder it's gone on for all these years!"

She watched while Nanta knelt to be crowned with forget-me-nots by Jansy, who, with her robe of lobelia blue and her dark red plaits, was obviously the daughter of either Joy or Joan. Then Nanta came down the hall with great dignity, cheered to the echo by the girls, and attended by her red-headed maid, Margaret Marchwood, while the second twin, on the platform, arranged Jansy's blue robe in graceful folds and then sat at her feet.

"The Lavender Queen has evidently been a favourite," said a lady in the audience.

Patch heard the words. She knew from Rosamund what lay behind those cheers, but she kept the knowledge to herself.

"A serious Queen!" said someone else, as Tessa appeared. "She looks burdened by her new responsibilities."

"People don't know the story," Patch thought. "It's just as well. Tessa's very grave; I don't wonder!"

"Buck up, Theresa!" Nanta had urged in the dressing-room. "You look like a funeral!"

But Tessa's smile, as she came to be crowned, was still grave. She met the eyes of the Queens, as she stepped on to the platform, with shy diffidence.

"Oh, buck up, lass!" said Jen. "It's all over now!"

Tessa curtsied to the Queens and bowed to the girls in hall and gallery, then knelt to receive her white crown from Nanta.

Encouraging cheers greeted her, as she faced the school and bowed once more. Then, with a sigh of relief, she took her place on the central throne. The girls shouted their welcome and sympathy again and again, and her colour rose.

"Make them stop, Lavender," she urged desperately. "I don't know why they're going on like this. I suppose they're sorry for me."

"They're glad you've been crowned and they want to buck you up," Nanta said, and she nodded to Miss Lane to play for more dancing.

"What a beautiful train, Tessa!" said Joan Raymond, under cover of the music. "Aren't you very proud of it?"

"And where did you find those lupins? Surely they're early ones?" asked the President.

Tessa gave her a quick shy glance, for she was a little afraid of the President and she had been conscious of the grave look with which Mrs. Everett had greeted her.

"Mother sent to a shop in London weeks ago and said she wanted lupins for a ceremony to-day." She glanced at the great sheaf of rose, blue, white, lemon and apricot, which lay on her arm.

"The shop would think they were for a wedding," Maidlin smiled. "They're lovely! It was a good thought of your mother's."

Tessa shot a look at her; she liked little Mrs. Robertson. "Mother's been sweet to me, and so kind. She was sorry I made an ass of myself, but she has helped in every way she could."

"That's the sort of mother to have," Jen said.

"Don't let her down again!" the President warned her.

"I won't," Tessa vowed, with rising colour. "Nor the Club. Nor Lavender; she's been ten times a brick. I'm sorry I upset everybody, Mrs. Everett."

"We'll forget it now. I'm sure you'll be a good Queen when the time comes. Two terms will be better than none, and Lavender will see you through the summer."

Tessa looked across at Rosamund. "If I knew how to thank her for being so decent——! But I don't."

“Make it a jolly term, for her last, and look happy about it,” Rosamund said briskly. “That’s what she wants. She’s giving up a good deal to make it possible for you to wear that gorgeous train. Your part is to put everything behind you and help to make things go well this summer. You can do a great deal, without actually being Queen. Pull yourself together! Don’t leave it all to her. And cheer up and look yourself! I’m sure this solemn person isn’t really you.”

Tessa laughed, in spite of her trouble. “No, it’s Theresa. I’m trying to stifle Tessa.”

“Then don’t! It isn’t a success. I’m sure it’s Tessa the girls want as Queen. Buck up, do!”

Tessa squared her shoulders and sat upright. “Thank you, Lady Kentisbury. I will try.”

CHAPTER X

A RING FOR ROSALIND

“It feels odd to have Nanta Rose sitting on the platform,” Jen remarked. “She ought to be down there fiddling for the Club.”

“She’ll play for the party,” Rosamund explained. “The President is taking Margia home; she mustn’t tire herself. Rosalind will take over when she goes.”

“Then I shall have to change and dance. Her music always gets into my feet. How is your new little relation existing without her husband? I must speak to her. She seems to be enjoying the dancing.”

“Don’t speak about Bill!” Rosamund said hurriedly. “Patricia has been very brave, and we’ve kept her very busy, but it’s only a week since he went. She doesn’t talk about him.”

“I’ll be careful; I’m not quite an idiot, Rosamunda! Is she settling down?”

“Sorry, Jenny-Wren; I apologise! Oh yes! My girls love her—both babies and nurses. Nanny approves of her warmly and even lets her nurse Geoff. That’s a great concession; the others aren’t allowed to touch him. Even I only take him at certain times; Nanny is a tyrant where he’s concerned. But I’ve seen Patricia nursing him; doing it beautifully, and with such a look in her eyes!”

“Hungry, I suppose,” Jen agreed. “She ought to have one of her own.”

“I hope she will; it’s what she wants. As for Hyacinth and Lilac, they fell in love with her at sight; with her hair first, I think! Those red curls make our babes look almost colourless. But now they love all the parts of her. She’s useful too; she’s knitting a little coat for Geoff and doing it beautifully. She sews well, but she knits better. And she sings Scottish songs and lullabies to the children, who are greatly intrigued; they love Auntie Patch!”

“You must have made her husband very happy by offering to keep her at Kentisbury. It’s an ideal plan,” said Joan, joining in the conversation.

“Bill was pleased,” Rosamund agreed. “It suits everybody. It was Rosalind’s idea in the first place, though I had thought of it too. I’m going to change. I want one little dance before I take Patricia home.”

“Bring Mrs. Kane to see us,” said Jen. “I’d like to show her my boy twins. Or would it be putting ideas into her head?”

Rosamund laughed. “I’ll bring her. She won’t be allowed to spend all her life in the nursery, though that’s what she means to do.”

Several of the Queens had disappeared from the platform, to take off their robes and put on dance frocks. Nanta fetched her fiddle and pushed her lavender train well back out of the way, and, still crowned with forget-me-nots, struck up “Bonnetts so Blue.” The girls ran to make up sets, and the President collected Miss Lane, the violinist, and the White and Clover Queens, and drove them all off in her car.

“Where’s Jansy? She’s not dancing,” said Maidlin, still sitting with Joan and Joy on the dais.

“I saw her lobelia robe a few minutes ago. One can’t mistake that blue,” said Jansy’s mother. “I’m not certain, but I think the Club has a secret. Jansy has been rather mysterious during the holidays; there’s been something going on between her and Tessa and Phyl, and

Rosamund's in it too. But Jansy wouldn't tell me what they were up to. It was to do with tonight, and as nothing unusual has happened so far, we may hear about it soon."

"Elizabeth and Margaret know what it is," Joy remarked. "I'm sure they're in the secret, but they would only tell me it was Club business. The Club met in the barn, two nights ago, but only girls now at school were admitted. It was Jansy's invitation; she came back early on purpose."

"She told me there was to be a meeting and that was why she must come to you early," Joan agreed.

"But wasn't Nanta still with Lady Virginia? Did they meet without the Queen?" Maidlin asked.

"I fancy that was the point, Maidie." Joan smiled.

"Oh!" Maidlin thought this over. "And quite right too," she decided.

"Quite. We all feel the same. But we've had no hand in it. It's Jansy's affair," Joan said.

They sat watching the lines of "Steam Boat". Rosamund had coaxed Patch to join in and was leading her through the dance.

"Nanta laughs at this tune, but she always chooses it," said Joy.

"Bill Kane's little wife will be a dancer in no time. She's light on her feet," Joan remarked. "But she's a Scottish dancer, isn't she?"

"Jock says their footwork is so good." Maidlin quoted her husband. "Yes, Mrs. Kane has only to learn our movements; she's a dancer already. Oh, look! Here comes Jansy! Something is going to happen; you were right, Joan!"

"Another procession!" Joan laughed. "I'm glad we stayed up here. We have front seats."

Jen, pulling her partner with her, ran to the platform. Rosamund brought Patch to join the group of Queens.

Jansy, in her blue train, held up by her maid, Elizabeth, came through the hall, and Tessa followed, still robed and crowned and carrying her lupins. The dance broke off, and the girls cheered and clapped.

Nanta stared at the procession in blank astonishment. "Whatever's happening? What's all this about?"

"Lavender, we want you to have this, with love from us all." Jansy spoke out bravely. "We're terrifically grateful to you for the way you've helped the Club, and we want you to remember us always." She looked round, and Margaret-Twin thrust something into her hand.

"Oh, Jansy!" Nanta wailed. "You shouldn't—but—oh, how pretty! How lovely! But why did you, Jan?"

Jansy held out the lemon-coloured cushion on which Tessa's crown had been carried. A tiny box lay open upon it, and inside was a sapphire ring.

"Try it on!" Jansy commanded. "Your Aunt Rosamund told us the size, but we want to be sure it fits. Please put it on, Nanta Rose! We're so worried, in case it's too small!"

Dazed, Nanta slipped the ring on her finger. "It fits beautifully. I do love sapphires! I never had a ring before. But you shouldn't have done it. I didn't want anything like this!"

"But we did!" Margaret cried.

"The Club once gave a ring to the Head girl, because she'd been such a help," Jansy said. "But she hadn't done anything like you have. You will wear it, won't you, Nanta Rose?"

Patch smiled at the name, and looked at Rosamund.

"Jansy will say it," the Countess said.

"I like it too. I'm so glad they thought of this!"

"I wanted you to see the presentation. You'll always have a soft place for Rosalind, because she welcomed you when you were so shy."

"And frightened! She's pleased with her ring."

"Yes. Jansy wrote to consult me, and I told them she had nothing of the sort. She hasn't much jewellery, but what she has is all blue. She had a sapphire pendant as a bridesmaid's gift from Gilbert, and I gave her a blue brooch when she was crowned. It went well with her lavender; Jansy had one too. I insisted on providing the stones for the ring; the girls couldn't manage it alone, if they were to be good ones. Jansy said I must keep my jewels for my boarding-school, meaning the babies; but I argued that Rosalind comes from Kentisbury and should have a Kentisbury ring. I've a lot of small stones, taken from old jewellery that was worn by our ancestors in past centuries, and I use them for gifts to friends. I shall want some for my girls, but there aren't enough sapphires for four, so they'll have to put up with other colours. I let Big Twins see them one day, and Rosabel said at once that she liked the rubies best; most improper, with her blue eyes and fair hair! She was quite decided about it, so perhaps I'll keep the sapphires for Rosalin."

Patch smiled. "You've a soft spot for Rosalin, I believe."

"She's so like her father, a gentle little girl. As you've seen, she gives in to Rosabel too much, but we're putting that right by degrees. The tinies must have emeralds or amethysts, or perhaps a topaz necklet for one of them. As I couldn't possibly provide sapphires for them all, I told Jansy we could spare two or three for Rosalind. But the girls chose the setting for the ring, after asking me about the size. Come and congratulate her, and see how the ring looks, now that it's made up!"

The other Queens were crowding round to do the same.

"Well done, Janice!" said Joan. "A very happy thought on the part of the Club!"

"It was Tessa's idea," Jansy said. "But we were all thrilled when she said it."

"I congratulate you on your very tactful speech, Lob," said Jen. "There are still a few parents scattered about. You said just enough, but you didn't give away any secrets."

Jansy grinned. "I knew I'd have to be careful. I shall write and tell Littlejan. She planned the ring for Alison."

"Why did you let them do it?" Nanta looked at her aunt.

"I not only let them, I encouraged them," Rosamund told her. "It looks very pretty—yes, it's a little beauty. Jansy and Tessa have chosen well; the stones are beautifully set. Give us another dance, so that we can see it as you play!"

"Thank you very much indeed, everybody! It's far too good of you. I love my ring," and Nanta, with flushed cheeks and very bright eyes, began to play "The Queen's Jig."

"Very suitable," said Miss Raven, watching from a corner. "I'd have insisted on contributing, if I'd been consulted."

"I did contribute," Miss Verity boasted. "It's a very good idea."

"My dear, you look about seventeen in that Hamlet Club dress!" said the Head.

Miss Verity smoothed her rose-pink dance-frock. "Why should the girls have all the fun? I'm a member of the Club. It's very comfortable for running and skipping. My Aunt Marguerite in New York is jealous and wishes she could come back to the Club."

"Wasn't she the Queen at one time?"

"The Strawberry Queen; the third Queen. She was one of the original members of the Club."

“I suppose that wild welcome for Tessa was a demonstration of sympathy. Have I made a martyr of her?”

“No, not that, I am quite sure. The girls don’t excuse what she did. But they knew it would be hard for her to-night and they wanted to help her through. Shall we go and congratulate Rosalind?”

“And admire her ring,” the Head assented. “She has thoroughly deserved it. Thanks to her, chiefly, things are working out all right. I was doubtful about this coronation, though your idea seemed the best way out of the deadlock. It was a compromise, and that is often not satisfactory, but in this case I could see no other way. I was not happy about Tessa as Queen, even before the trouble happened; she seemed irresponsible in many ways, last summer, and I did not feel sure she could be trusted. Perhaps that helped to make me a little hard on her when she let us down really very badly.”

“I don’t think you were too hard,” Miss Verity said emphatically. “Tessa needed a lesson. I don’t believe the Club would have been satisfied, if you had not acted—not the senior thinking members. They would always have kept a feeling that Tessa had not been quite up to standard, and that you had not cared enough for the Club to do anything about it. It is because the Club is so important to the school that the Queen matters so much; the elder girls feel that, I think. As it is, Tessa has paid for her mistake and will be a stronger Queen. The girls sympathise with her, but they respect her—and, of course, you!—more than if the matter had been passed over lightly.”

“I am glad you think so. I’d have liked them to choose another Queen, but there seemed no hope of that.”

“Oh, they couldn’t do that! They’d have felt they were letting Tessa down. Having chosen her, they had to stick to her.”

“I realise that. I thought things might be awkward this term, but I believe it will be all right.”

“With Rosalind and Janice in charge,” Miss Verity agreed. “They’ll see that there is no difficulty. Everyone will be very good to Tessa, but so long as Rosalind is here they’ll turn to her as Queen.”

“She has saved the situation, and the Club,” said the Head. “Come and look at that very pretty ring!”

CHAPTER XXI

SQUASHING CARRY CARTER

“Isn’t it gorgeous, Nanta Rose?” Jansy and the twins and Rosemary were full of excitement, as the car took them to town one morning.

“Quite marvellous! But I say, all of you! Don’t talk about it at school. It would be too hard on Tessa.”

Jansy sobered at once. “It would be rotten for her. She’ll want to go as much as we do, but she couldn’t expect it, could she?”

“No, I’m afraid she couldn’t,” Nanta agreed.

“We won’t tease her about it.” The twins spoke together.

“We won’t say anything at school,” Jansy decided.

However, Tessa raised the subject herself. She met the Abbey crowd at the gate and walked up to the school with Nanta and Jansy.

“I suppose all you people are going to Mary Damayris’s last night? I saw the date in the paper.”

Nanta glanced at her doubtfully. “It’s hard luck on you, Tessa.”

“We are going,” Jansy admitted. “Aunty Joy told us this morning that she’d booked our seats. Mary Damayris told her the date and she wrote for tickets. There’ll be a rush for them.”

“There won’t be an empty seat in the house,” Nanta said. “They’ll all be sold days before.”

“You’ll tell me about it, won’t you?” Tessa asked wistfully. “I’ll want to hear every single thing.”

“Of course we will! Isn’t there any hope, Tessa? Perhaps your mother will take you,” Jansy suggested.

“I couldn’t ask her; not possibly.”

“I’m afraid you couldn’t,” Nanta assented sadly. “But I wish you could be there.”

“There’s not a hope. I’ll have to hear about it afterwards,” Tessa groaned.

“I’m afraid no mother could be such an angel as to go with you, after that last time. We’ll tell you all about it,” Jansy promised.

“The place will be packed. Everybody will want to say good-bye to her,” Tessa said. “I’d give anything to be there. No, not quite anything! Don’t look like that, Rosalind. I won’t play that trick again.”

Some days later she was standing at the gate, talking with Nanta, while the twins, Rosemary and Mike, fitted themselves into the car, when a handsome well-dressed woman came up to them. She had been keeping an eye on the school entrance till she saw the girl she wanted.

“Oh, hullo, Tess! I’ve been looking for you.”

Tessa swung round, her face flaming. “Please don’t call me that! I loathe it.”

“Oh, gosh! Have I put my foot in it? I was only trying to be friendly,” Carol Carter laughed. “Do you prefer to be Theresa? I say, Tessa, my dear, I want you to do something for me.”

Nanta turned to the car, but Jansy laid an imploring hand on her arm. “Wait a minute, Nanta Rose! I want to see what Tessa will do.”

“It must be that Carry Carter snake,” said Elizabeth.

“Perhaps Tessa will scratch her eyes out.” Margaret gloated hopefully over the idea.

Tessa, very straight, stared at Miss Carter. “I thought Mother told you she didn’t wish me to see any more of you?”

“Oh, bosh! I want you to do me a good turn. You know all these people who are friends of Mary Damayris,” Carol hurried on. “Couldn’t you persuade one of them to ask her to get me a ticket for her farewell show? I had flu for several days, and when I was well enough to care about anything I wrote for tickets and they were all gone. Surely Miss Damayris could wangle just one for me? Or you could beg one of her friends to ask. Didn’t you say you’d met her sister?”

“I have met her sister. I dare say perhaps she could manage it, but I’m not going to ask her.” Tessa’s voice was decisive.

“Oh, look here, Tessa! I did you a good turn once!”

“What an ass!” Jansy muttered.

Tessa threw back her head, her face scarlet. “It wasn’t a good turn! It was the worst thing anybody ever did to me! I wish I’d never met you.”

“Don’t be a little idiot! It’s blown over, and you’re the Queen all right; why make a fuss now? You know you enjoyed that night! Are you going to help me?”

Tessa’s eyes were dangerously bright. “I can’t. But if I could I wouldn’t.” And she turned and stalked off in the opposite direction.

“The Carter ass doesn’t know how sick Tessa feels about not being really Queen,” Jansy murmured.

“She doesn’t know Tessa isn’t really Queen,” Nanta rejoined. “The secret has been kept from outsiders. Jump in, Jan! We can’t help Tessa; she’s handled this job jolly well. I don’t like this person——”

“Aren’t you the last Queen, Lady Rosalind Kane?” Carol Carter’s voice rang out behind them.

Nanta turned, her face flaming as Tessa’s had done when she was addressed as “Tess”.

“I am. Do you want me?” she asked curtly.

“You must have heard what I asked Tessa to do.” Carol’s tone was gracious and friendly; she had always been a snob, dearly loving a title. “Perhaps you could help me, Lady Rosalind? Your aunt, Lady Kentisbury, must have influence with Lady Quellyn and Lady Marchwood. Wouldn’t they spare a ticket for me? I’m so very anxious to be at the last night of the ballet. Perhaps one of the children”—she glanced at the twins and Rosemary—“wouldn’t mind being left at home? They can hardly understand——”

“That would be impossible. They have been promised the treat.” Nanta’s voice was hard. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.” Her face burned suddenly. “I’m not really sorry. You had no right to take Tessa to town that night. We all feel you let her and her mother down badly; the school and the Club too. Good-day!”

Jansy, wide-eyed, was listening from the car door. She moved aside, and Nanta sprang in. “Please go on, Frost!”

Carry Carter, biting her lips angrily, was left on the pavement. Tessa was already out of sight.

“I don’t like that creature,” Margaret said viciously. “I said she was a snake and a serpent, and she is.”

“She’s too much made-up. I thought she looked just awful,” Elizabeth remarked.

“She’s a horror,” Jansy said fervently. “You didn’t like her, did you, Nanta Rose?”

“No.” Nanta lay back in her corner, looking tired. “I hate that sort of fuss.”

“You hated her calling you names, didn’t you?” Elizabeth asked shrewdly.

“She’s a cat,” said Margaret.

“I did hate it. But she doesn’t understand. What I hated most was her idea that one of you should be left at home.”

“I should think so! Like her cheek! As if we’d give up Mary Damayris’s last night for a worm like her!” Elizabeth cried.

“You stood up to her jolly well,” Jansy said. “I guess she was mad.”

“She looked furious,” Margaret chuckled. “I’m so glad you told her off, Nanta Rose!”

“If she sends you a box of chocolates, don’t eat them,” Elizabeth said darkly.

“Oh, Elizabeth!” Nanta laughed. “What an idea! Tessa was splendid, wasn’t she, Jansy?”

“Rather! She’ll never have any more to do with Carry Carter. I wish she could know we call her that. She’d loathe it.”

“Write her a letter, and say—‘Dear Carry’,” Elizabeth suggested.

“Don’t think any more about her,” Nanta advised. “She’s not the right sort.”

“But we can tell Mother?” Margaret asked anxiously. “We want to tell her Carry Carter tried to grab our seats!”

“Oh yes! You may tell your mother. But don’t spin it into a story. Just tell her what happened.”

“I shall tell her how you and Tessa squashed Miss Carry Carter,” Elizabeth said, with gusto.

Joy heard the story with secret amusement. She was still more amused, when, shopping in town a few days later, she came face to face with Carry.

“Oh, Joy!” Carry exclaimed. “Don’t you remember me, your bridesmaid when you were May Queen?”

Joy looked her up and down, noting the over-dressing and the make-up which had jarred on Elizabeth. “It’s Carry Carter, isn’t it? Oh, yes! I remember you—several things about you, in fact.”

Carry gave her a sharp look. “I’m called Carol. It’s my name.”

“I always think of you as Carry, or Caroline,” Joy said gently. “And we say ‘maid-of-honour’ now, not ‘bridesmaid’.”

“We were silly infants in those days. Perhaps you would prefer me to say Lady Quellyn?”

“It would be more correct. And more courteous,” Joy said calmly.

Carry gave her another quick look. “Oh, bosh! We were at school together.”

Joy said nothing. She knew what was coming, but she had no intention of helping Carry.

Entirely insensitive to the chill in the air, Carry hurried on. “I thought perhaps you could help me. I’m so very anxious to be at Mary Damayris’s last night, and I can’t get a seat. I thought—I hear you know her—I hoped maybe you could help me to get one? Her sister lives in your Abbey, doesn’t she? Perhaps she——”

She stopped, for Joy had drawn herself up and was obviously going to speak. Suddenly Carry remembered the temper which had blazed out during their schooldays. But Joy—well, Lady Quellyn, then!—could not make a scene in the street!

“My dear Caroline,” Joy said, “if I had all the seats in the theatre—or even one extra, which I haven’t—I wouldn’t spare an inch for you. You tempted that child Tessa. Quite frankly, we all loathe and despise you for it. Good-morning!”

She turned to her car, leaving Carry staring after her.

“Gosh! I have upset the good little girls at the Abbey!” Carry said to herself. “What a fuss!”

“Carry Carter doesn’t like me. She never did.” Joy chuckled, as Margaret would have done, and she went home and told the story of the encounter, to the delight of the twins and the amusement of Jansy and Nanta.

“We’ve squashed Carry Carter properly between us!” Elizabeth said, with much satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXII

FAREWELL TO A DANCER

The great occasion was over. Mary Damayris had danced in public for the last time. Laden with roses from Kentisbury and the Pallant, the Hall and the Manor, and wearing her fairy's frock with its rainbow skirt, she had come out to bow her thanks and her farewells, over and over again. Radiantly happy, she disappeared at last, and reluctantly the audience began to disperse.

In the vestibule, Jansy Raymond caught Nanta's arm. "Nanta Rose! Look—Tessa! Oh, do you think——"

"I'm sure Tessa hasn't come on the quiet," Nanta said firmly. "But we must find out, or we'll be wondering all through Sunday. Perhaps that's her mother with her."

She made her way through the crowd. "Tessa!"

Tessa whirled round. "Rosalind! Wasn't it wonderful? Mother, this is Rosalind Kane; you saw her on May-Day. Oh, Nanta Rose—Jansy! It's quite all right! Mother brought me, after all! Wasn't it marvellous of her? She only told me this morning, though she booked our seats ages ago."

"Oh, I am glad! That was kind!" Nanta looked at Tessa's mother in delight.

"That's the sort of mother to have," said Joy, close behind them. "But we must hurry, girls. It's very late."

"Tessa, I'm so thankful you could come and that it's all right!" Nanta cried, as she hurried away.

"So that's worked out happily!" Joy said, as they drove home. "I'm very glad."

"What a marvellous surprise for Tessa! She was terribly gloomy about it yesterday," Jansy remarked.

"I hope Miss Carry Carter didn't find anybody to give her a ticket!" Elizabeth chuckled.

"Now for Mary Damayris's wedding!" Margaret, far from being tired, bounced up and down in her seat in excitement. "Now for our lovely bridesmaids' frocks!"

"She isn't Mary Damayris any more, after to-night," Elizabeth argued. "She's Miss Damaris Ellerton now."

"I wouldn't say that," Joy said. "You're in rather a hurry, Elizabeth. People will always think of her as Mary Damayris."

"She was wonderful to-night," Nanta said wistfully. "It seems tragic that she should give it up. Something's being lost. We'll never see her dance again."

"But something new is coming," Mary Devine suggested, from her corner of the car. "She is going to be very happy. Other people can dance, but only Damaris can marry Brian."

"Other people don't dance as she does. You do think she ought to give it up, Mary-Dorothy?"

"To be married—yes, Nanta, I do."

"Then it must be all right. But I wish she could do both!"

"You can't have everything," Mary smiled.

"Are you going to wear your Hamlet Club ring at the wedding, Nanta Rose?" Elizabeth asked.

"Of course I am! It will look lovely with my blue frock."

“Then Twin and me will wear our——”

“Elizabeth!” Nanta exclaimed, shocked. “And you’re fourteen!”

Margaret chuckled. “That’s the Queen speaking, Elizabeth-Twin. Better be careful!”

“Twin and I,” Elizabeth corrected herself, “are going to wear our daisy rings, that Auntie Maid gave us when we’d had measles. They’re green and blue; they’ll look lovely too.”

“I wonder you haven’t broken them years ago,” Jansy observed.

“They’re put away carefully, for great occasions, aren’t they, Twinnies?” Joy said.

“Jansy’ll be the only one of us big people without a ring,” Margaret said unkindly. “Rosemary and Myonie don’t count. They’re too little to have rings.”

“Rosemary has a very old ring, as blue as Nanta’s, that we found under the Abbey, a long while ago,” Joy told her. “But she doesn’t wear it yet.”

“Then Jansy *will* be the only one without a ring!” Margaret said in triumph. “Myonie doesn’t really belong to the family.”

“Somebody’s going to give me a ring some day,” Jansy said calmly. “But not yet. I’m not in a hurry.”

Everybody looked at her—Joy, Mary, Nanta, the twins. Ivor Quellyn, driving the car, gave a grunt of amusement.

“Who is? Who will it be?” cried Margaret.

“And how do you know?” Elizabeth added.

“Janice Raymond, what do you mean?” Joy demanded.

“I expect somebody will want to marry me some day,” Jansy said casually. “You have at least two rings when you get married.”

“Have you any idea who it is likely to be?” Mary asked gravely.

Jansy was perfectly frank. “I’d like it to be Dickon, but I can’t be sure. He hasn’t said anything about it.”

“I should hope not! Does your mother know your plans?” Joy asked.

“She thinks it would be a very good idea. If I have to go out of our family, she’d like me to go into the President’s.”

“Dickon is the President’s elder boy,” Joy explained to Nanta, who was looking dazed at this announcement of Jansy’s intentions. “He’s the same age as Janice.”

“I’m one day older than he is.” Jansy put her right on the point. “It’s natural I should think about it first. If Dickon doesn’t want me, later on, I expect there’ll be somebody else.”

“You could have Alastair Fraser and go into Jandy Mac’s family,” Joy said. “He’s your age too.”

“I like Alastair quite a lot, but I like Dickon better,” Jansy asserted. “But there’s no hurry; there are much more important things. The exam this summer, and perhaps after that I’ll go to college.”

“Those are much more important,” Nanta agreed, with a laugh.

“Will you get married some day, Nanta Rose?”

“I’m not thinking of it at present, Lob.”

“You’re old enough; you’re grown up. I expect somebody will want you.”

“Thank you, Janice! But I don’t feel old enough yet.”

“People are getting married all the time. I can’t help it, if they put ideas into my head,” Jansy argued.

“Mary Damayris will be the next,” Elizabeth said. “And we’ve got all her lovely presents. She’s coming to unpack them soon and then we’ll see them.”

"I shall hire Bess, the blood-hound from the farm, to patrol the gardens at night," Joy said. "Or we might have a detective or two, to guard the presents, as we did for Rosamund."

"Could we ask Tessa to come and see the presents?" Nanta asked. "She'd be so pleased and proud to be invited!"

"That's a kind thought," Joy said. "You must ask Damaris, when she has unpacked and spread out her treasures. I expect she'll be willing."

"I think Tessa has a present for Mary Damayris," Jansy said. "She's very mysterious about it, but I believe there's something."

"I think so, too, but she won't tell what it is," Nanta assented. "She's shy and a little frightened about offering it; I told her everybody would be pleased."

Damaris, arriving next day in Brian's car, seized Rachel and hugged her. "Wasn't it marvellous last night? Now where are all our pretties? I want Brian to see them. At the Hall, did you say?"

"Most definitely at the Hall. There's no room for them here." Rachel smiled at Brian. "You didn't think we were going to keep them in the refectory, I hope? Lady Joy is taking charge of them, and you're to go and unpack and spread them out as soon as you like. You're both invited to lunch, so that you can start on the job at once. I'll come to see the result after I close the Abbey. I'm aching to know what is in all those parcels and boxes."

"Whoops! We'll have fun this afternoon, Brian! And then I must begin on the letters. I shall do nothing else for the next fortnight."

"I'll help," Brian said. "You can make up a letter and I'll copy it for everybody and you can sign it."

"Did you have a wonderful send-off from town?" Rachel asked.

"Oh, rather! Madame and Antoine in tears, and the whole company cheering us. Elladella looked very cheerful; she's chief star, now that I'm done for. They're all coming to the church, and Lady Jen has been an angel and invited everybody to the Manor afterwards."

"She insisted on having the honour of giving a reception for you," Rachel agreed. "Lady Joy was indignant, but she was pacified when we asked her to take care of the presents. Anyone who wants to see them is to go to the Hall."

"That will be everybody," Damaris grinned. "There'll be a procession through the park and gardens."

"It will make less of a crowd at the Manor," Rachel said, and told of Nanta's wish to invite Tessa to see the presents.

"Oh, sure!" Damaris said heartily. "Tell Nanta Rose to ask her, as soon as we're ready for visitors. I'd like to do something to please that girl. I feel she's had a bad time, through me; though I couldn't help it."

Tessa, invited by Nanta and Jansy, came in great delight. She begged to be allowed to bring Phyl, and the two went round, exclaiming in wonder at the fine show of gifts. Very shyly, Tessa offered a tray-cloth, embroidered by herself, and Phyl a handkerchief edged with Buckinghamshire lace, and Damaris thanked them warmly and promised to use the cloth at her first tea-party in her new home and to carry the handkerchief at her wedding.

"You made those girls very happy, Nanta Rose. I'm glad you thought of it," she said.

"Thank you for letting them come. They were terribly pleased to be asked," Nanta said gratefully.

Jen, busy preparing for the reception, rang up Rosamund one evening. "Ros, you're bringing Bill's little wife, aren't you?"

“May I? She’d love to come. She’ll be thrilled.”

“I saw her with you at the farewell show. Of course she must come. We all love her.”

“She said to me the other day that she felt she had been adopted into a big happy family. It was after I’d brought her to lunch with you and to tea with Joy and to see the Abbey. We’d already been to Maid and Joan. She feels she knows you all now. She is so pleased!”

“How nice of her! I’ll never forget what a picture she looked that evening, in the wonderful collar, with the emerald star in her glorious hair! Is she still knitting?”

“Yes, but not for Geoff,” Rosamund said mysteriously.

“*What?*” Jen shouted. “Do you mean——?”

“I do, Jenny-Wren, but don’t shriek into the phone like that. She’s going to give Bill a little Christmas present.”

“Oh, I’m so glad! Is she very happy?”

“Very, except when she thinks about Bill. We’re all thrilled. If it’s a girl she’ll be called Rosella, after the emerald collar, which belonged to Lady Rosella in Henry the Eighth’s reign.”

“If it’s a girl, I hope she’ll inherit her mother’s lovely hair.”

“We can’t arrange that. She may be a little Kane and look just like all of ours—and Bill, of course.”

“Tell her mother to manage better than that! Does she still live in the nursery with your babes?”

“Oh yes! She’s very happy there, and our girls and Nanny love her. She wanted to go on knitting for Geoff and making frocks for our girls, but I forbid it, so now she’s making the loveliest little boots and vests and jackets for Rosella.”

“And if Rosella’s a boy? What will he be called?”

“Roger, I think, after Dr. Black’s son, who is going to marry our distant relation, Rosalin Macdonald, some day.”

“All in the family!” Jen said. “I’m very very glad. Patricia won’t be lonely any more.”

“Don’t say anything to her at the wedding! It’s much too soon.”

“All right; I won’t. I’ll send a present for Rosella later on. It’s a pretty name. Why didn’t you use it?”

“Because we hadn’t a girl to spare for it,” Rosamund retorted. “We’ve only four, and they’re provided for. If Geoff had been a girl he might have been Rosella. But I prefer him as a boy.”

“Yes, rather! You’ll need to have another, to be company for him. After all those sisters, he’ll be an odd-man-out. Give him a playmate!”

“We’ve thought of that. Perhaps I shall, some day, but not yet. I don’t want Geoff to be lonely, and Hugh won’t be a companion for him.”

“Hugh will be away at school. You must have another boy; I insist on it, for Geoff’s sake,” Jen said firmly.

And she heard Rosamund laugh, as she rang off.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TALLEST BRIDESMAID

Thanks to Rachel's busy three months, the wedding preparations were almost complete, and Damaris was able to give all her time to acknowledging the presents which kept pouring in. Joy invited her to stay at the Hall, to be on the spot; but Damaris, thanking her warmly and spending much of her time scribbling in the library where the gifts were spread out, chose to go home to the Abbey at night. Those late evenings and early mornings were very precious to Rachel, and the girls talked long into the night, recalling incidents of their schooldays, their life in France and Italy, and their home on the Cumberland fells.

"You will come and stay with us at Heather Garth, won't you?" Damaris asked wistfully. "I don't want to feel I'm losing you."

"I won't be lost! I shall come to see you and the fells." Rachel nursed her golden cat as they talked. "Benedicta can take over my job. She's a good guide to the Abbey now."

"I'd have liked Blessing for a bridesmaid too, but I couldn't see how to fit her in. Does she mind, do you think?"

"I'm sure she doesn't. You couldn't have three maids at the end of your procession, and she wouldn't have fitted in anywhere else. She understands that."

"It's really awfully decent of everybody to take so much trouble about me!" Damaris broke out, as they sat together on the night before the wedding. "Both the Hall and the Manor turned upside down and completely upset—Brian staying at the Manor whenever he feels like it, and me running in and out at the Hall as if I owned the place! And all just to get me married!"

Rachel smiled at her. "It seems odd to us, but they feel it an honour to help you to get married. They've all been the most tremendous help; I don't know how we'd have managed without them. These rooms are so tiny; you'd have had to go and live in the village for a few weeks. Are you going to the Hall in the morning?"

"No, everything's finished, thanks to you and Brian. I shall stay here quietly with you, and you must dress me and take me to the church. One of the cars will fetch us from the Abbey gate, after taking the bridesmaids. The twins are in a state of wild thrills! You'll see that Derek meets Nanta Rose, won't you?"

"I'll further your wishes to that extent," Rachel agreed. "But I hope he'll have the sense not to go too fast with Nanta."

"I warned him she was still a schoolgirl. He isn't much interested." Damaris grinned. "He says he'll be polite to her, to please me. But he hasn't seen her yet."

"Marry, have you any regrets for your career?"

"Not one, old thing. I'm too keen on Brian. We're going to be very happy."

"I'm thankful," Rachel said quietly. "I had to ask you."

"There have always been bits of it I've hated," Damaris said, with sudden vehemence. "The spite and jealousy, and struggling for the best parts. I've been lucky; people liked my Goose-girl and Fairy so much that I've been kept to them and I've had almost no disappointments and tears and agonies, but I've seen plenty of them in other girls. Elladella's always glooming about because somebody's got the part she wanted. In some ways I'll be glad to get away from it all. When I've come home here I've felt how different it is."

“Now you’ll always live in the different happier world.” Rachel knew enough of life behind the scenes to understand. “I’m glad you are leaving it, Marry dear. Now let’s go to bed, to prepare for to-morrow and your new wider life!”

“I hope it will be fine. Think of those masses of people in their best frocks trailing through the gardens to the Hall to see the presents!”

“Sir Kenneth will have the cars running to and fro all afternoon. But I hope the sun will shine for you.”

“Come and look at the sky,” and Damaris went out and stood on the garth. “Remember our first night here as Guardians, Ray? How hurt and broken I was! And now—I’m willing to leave it all, and you, and ballet, just for Brian. Isn’t it queer?”

“It’s how it ought to be, Marry.”

“I know, but it’s queer, all the same.” And she went out to the garden to smell the lilies and roses in the dark, before going to bed.

Very early in the morning Nanta and Jansy appeared, begging to be allowed to help to dress the bride. To their delight Rachel gave them some jobs to do while she dressed, and Damaris said graciously, “You may each brush my hair for five minutes. I’m used to having a dresser.”

Then Rachel, in her long blue frock, sent them racing home to change, and herself helped Damaris into her wedding-gown, while Miss Jenkinson came from the village, to take care of the Abbey for the day, and exclaimed in delight at sight of the bride.

“You like your bracelet, don’t you?” Damaris asked anxiously. “The girls simply adore theirs.”

Rachel looked at her silver bracelet, set with deep blue stones. “I adore mine too. The twins and Rosemary and Myonie have green, haven’t they?”

“To match their frocks. But Jansy and Nanta Rose have blue, like yours.”

“They’re very pretty. Didn’t they cost poor Brian a fortune?”

“I fancy my father-in-law helped,” Damaris laughed.

“There! You look lovely, Marry dear.”

“You don’t look too bad yourself. That blue suits you, and so does your wreath. I’m glad you and the girls agreed to have flowers and not hats.”

“Jansy and Nanta are used to wearing crowns of flowers. I’m not, and I feel rather a freak,” Rachel said, laughing. “But I couldn’t spoil your picture. With all the youngsters wearing wreaths I couldn’t insist on a hat!”

“You look jolly nice. I wish some man would fall for the chief bridesmaid!”

“I don’t want him,” Rachel assured her.

As she put the last touches to her sister’s veil and flowers, there came the clang of the Abbey bells.

“Michael and Cecily!” Damaris cried. “Who’s ringing them for me? Benedicta wasn’t coming here this morning!”

“No, she said you must be left with only me. It was nice of her,” Rachel said. “Jansy told me she and Nanta were going to ring for you, when you’d be starting for the church.”

“How marvellous of them! I hope they won’t be late!”

“They’ll see to that. Sir Ivor and Lady Joy will bring them in the car. There! You really are ready now. You look a picture, Marry. And the bells have stopped, so come and find our car!”

The best man, a dark handsome lad rather taller than his cousin Brian, glanced at the white-robed bride, and then at the colourful procession which followed her.

“Jolly fine! Nice little green kids! Lovely red hair, the bigger two have. One of the last pair has it too; must be a sister. But the other—that’s the girl young Damaris wants to interest me in. Gosh, I don’t blame her! What a lovely lass the tallest bridesmaid is!”

Fortunately Brian’s interest was centred on his bride. He could not take his eyes off Damaris in her cloudy veil, so he was unconscious that his best man was taking no notice of him whatever. Derek gazed fascinated at Nanta, whose grave eyes were watching Damaris and Rachel.

“Rachel’s brave,” she said to herself. “I know she’s glad for Damaris to marry, but all the same it’s going to leave her alone and they have been such chums all their lives. Mary-Dorothy told me how Rachel was ready to give up everything for Damaris and her career. Now she’s giving her up altogether, but she doesn’t look in the least upset.”

Maidlin Robertson, in a blue gown to match the elder part of the bride’s retinue, gave Damaris away, taking the place of her father, as she had tried to do when she broke the news of their father’s death to the girls, eight years before.

Then it was all over, and the procession left the vestry and came down the aisle, Damaris with her veil thrown back and arranged carefully by Rachel. Her eyes found friends on every side; Madame Roskova, Georges Antoine, Ella and the rest of the ballet company; Madame Bonnet, her first teacher, and Albert and Annette Berthelot, who had all come from Annecy for the occasion; M. Jean Berthelot, her agent. She gave them radiant smiles, and laughed at the reproach in “Papa” Berthelot’s face. Then she found Lord Kentisbury and Rosamund, and with them “little Mrs. Kane,” with her gleaming red hair and a dress of her favourite green under a big white coat.

At last everyone had been transported to the Manor, and Derek found his way to the chief bridesmaid.

“Miss Rachel, will you introduce me to the tallest maid-of-honour? I know she’s a ladyship. Do I have to call her that all the time?”

Rachel smiled at him. “She doesn’t like it, but I don’t see what else you can do. You can’t call her ‘Miss Kane’. Don’t insist on it too much! Come and speak to her. Rosalind, this is Derek Grandison. You must have seen him in church.”

Nanta looked at Derek. “Did you take care of Brian nicely? We hadn’t much to do for Damaris.”

“I forgot all about Brian,” Derek said promptly. “I was stunned by your pretty frocks and colours.”

“Did you think we looked nice?” Jansy asked.

Derek glanced down at her. “Hello, Miss Pigtails!”

“Oh! Rude!” she flashed at him.

“No, really! I didn’t mean it that way. I like them; they’re jolly fine. How do you make them that lovely colour?”

“It just happened,” Jansy told him, still inclined to be indignant. “I get them from Mother.”

“Why don’t your sisters have them too?”

She stared at him. “Because they’re too little. But how do you know they haven’t? You’ve never seen Jenny and Jill!”

“Jenny and Jill? But weren’t they bridesmaids too?”

“He means the twins, Jansy,” said Nanta.

“Yes, the twins. You kept watching them, to see if they were being good.”

Jansy grinned. “They’re not my sisters; they’re only sort of cousins. Look over there! Talking to Damaris—I mean Mrs. Grandison! Did you think I had two mothers?”

“Gosh!” said Derek, gazing at Joan and Joy, who stood with Damaris and Brian. “What an amazing likeness! Which of them belongs to you? Do you know your own mother?”

“The one in brown is mine. The green one is Auntie Joy, and the twins belong to her. She and Mother are really proper cousins.”

“Lady Quellyn,” said Nanta. “Haven’t you met Sir Ivor in town?”

“I’ve seen him at a concert. I’m going to meet him presently. I’m only just home from Rhodesia.”

“Oh! Like Brian?” The girls looked at him with interest.

“More or less. He stayed with us; I had to see him through this ordeal.”

“Nanta Rose, we ought to go and help,” Jansy suggested.

“Stay and help me. I don’t know a soul,” he urged. “I don’t even know your name, Miss—may I say it again?”

“You may. I don’t mind,” Jansy retorted.

“Miss Pigtales, then. Won’t you introduce yourself?”

“She’s Janice Raymond,” Nanta said. “At school she’s called Lob.”

“Too bad! And what were you called at school, Lady Rosalind?”

“I’m still at school, till the end of this term.”

“No, really?”

“She’s Lavender. We’re Lob and Lavender,” Jansy said. “Or else she’s Nanta Rose.”

“Jansy! That’s only a silly nickname, Mr. Grandison.”

“It’s a dear little name,” said Derek. “Where does it come from?”

“My second name is Atalanta. When I was small it was shortened to Nanta by my sisters.”

“Well, I say! May I call you Lady Nanta?” His eyes smiled at her. “I feel a trifle terrified of Lady Rosalind. It sounds so stately. Lady Nanta couldn’t be in the least frightening. Don’t you play the violin? Brian told me.”

“I play a little,” Nanta began.

“A little!” Jansy cried. “You should hear her play for country-dancing! She’s our Abbey Fiddler!”

“I hope I shall hear her. And I want to see your Abbey. Brian and Damaris have told me about it.” He looked at Nanta. “Music is all the world to me. Brian said it was the same with you. I’m writing a sonata for violin and piano. Would you try it over for me some day?”

Nanta looked at him in awed amazement.

“New music? You’re making up new music, like Mozart and Beethoven?”

He chuckled. “I don’t claim to have reached those heights. If they are your standard I’m afraid I’ll be a disappointment. But I have tried my hand at a sonata.”

“Isn’t Dr. Grandison your uncle? Is he helping you?” Jansy asked.

“I’d love to hear your music,” Nanta cried.

“Uncle John has been giving me points,” Derek admitted. “I asked him to pull my stuff to pieces, but he said there wasn’t much wrong. He likes my attempts quite a lot.”

“But what a thrill! I never thought I’d meet a real composer, except Dr. Grandison and Lady Quellyn. She writes lovely songs,” Nanta said. “I’d like to hear your sonata.”

“I want to hear you play it! I play myself, of course, but I want to listen while somebody else plays the thing.”

“I wouldn’t be good enough.”

“If you play Mozart and Beethoven, you’ll be more than good enough. I hope you won’t scorn my efforts. I’ll arrange it somehow, if you’ll really help me.”

“I’d be proud!” Nanta said earnestly.

“Oh, good! And I may call you Lady Nanta? It’s such a friendly little name.”

Nanta laughed. “If you call Jansy Pigtails, you may call me Nanta.”

“Lady Nanta! It’s jolly pretty,” Jansy cried.

“Lady Nanta it shall be,” Derek said firmly.

CHAPTER XXIV

A PARTY FOR MARY DAMAYRIS

"I saw you with Rosalind Kane," Brian told his cousin, as he waited for Damaris to come. "You be careful, my lad. Don't go too fast and upset her, or you'll have Lady Kentisbury on your track."

"I'm coming here for the week-end, when you two are safely in Scotland," Derek retorted. "I threw myself on Lady Quellyn's mercy and asked for a chance of some music. Lady Nanta is going to play my sonata, and Lady Quellyn will accompany her. I shall sit and enjoy it—or, more likely, see all the faults much too plainly. Lady Quellyn's keen to hear the thing."

"Lady Nanta!" said Brian. "Who gave you leave—but here comes my Pirouette! Now we must get out of this!"

They ran through showers of rose leaves to the car and drove away, to spend one night at Jen's old home on the Yorkshire moors, and next day to go on to Scotland, crossing the Clyde at Erskine Ferry and coming round the head of Patricia Kane's little loch and dropping down to Vairy Castle.

For some time the guests lingered, going to the Hall to see the presents or talking at the Manor. They began to disperse at last, and the cars were kept busy taking the Londoners to the station.

Derek, invited to stay the night at the Manor in place of Brian, as Jen said, had been introduced to new friends—Lord and Lady Kentisbury and Mrs. Kane, the Raymonds and the Robertsons. For some time he did not notice that his first acquaintances had disappeared, but presently he realised that "Miss Pigtales", Nanta, Rachel, the twins, and the smaller bridesmaids were nowhere in sight and remarked on the fact to Joy, with whom he was firmly making friends.

"Where are all the bridesmaids, Lady Quellyn?"

"I don't know, but my guess is that they've seized a car and gone off to the barn to dance," Joy said.

"They asked me to tell you, if you missed them," Mary Devine explained. "They said you were to come too."

"We will, when everybody has gone. We must have a party for Mary Damayris," Jen said, hearing Mary's remark. "We'll have a car and drive round. After all this standing about and excitement I don't feel any urge to walk through the park! Will you come for one little dance, Rosamunda?"

"Not to-day, I think. We've a long way to go and we've been a long time away from home. We'll go now, if you'll excuse us. Patricia wouldn't care to dance and it would be dull for her and Geoffrey."

Jen went with them to their car. "Don't let Bill's little wife tire herself!"

Presently the Manor was quiet, and Derek found himself with Joy, Jen and Mary Devine driving down the lanes, as Maidlin and Joan had done some time before.

"What a wonderful old gate-way!" he exclaimed, as they left the car and walked through the Abbey garden.

"The gate-house of the Abbey. You shall see it all to-morrow. Rachel will take you round," Jen said. "This is the garden your new cousin made, when she'd lost her power to dance and

was heartbroken and desolate. She had to do something about it, so she made a garden; it used to be a rough meadow.”

Derek’s eyes swept from the rockeries, gay with sedums and rock-roses, to the lupins and delphiniums, tall and blue against an old gray wall, the masses of flowers and little plots of restful grass, the roses and lilies by the gate-house. “What a marvellous memorial to leave behind her!”

“It will always be the Damaris garden to us, even though Benedicta has taken charge now,” Joy said. “Do you hear anything, Mr. Grandison?”

“I hear a fiddle; played well too.” There was an eager note in Derek’s voice. “Is it the tallest bridesmaid who is playing?”

“It certainly is. We call her our fiddler for the Abbey. Come and look at them!” Joy led the way through the gap in the hedge to the ancient barn.

“I *say*! What a pretty sight!” Derek said quietly.

Six bridesmaids, in no way disturbed that their silken skirts reached to their ankles, were dancing “Winifred’s Knot” in a colourful blue and green ring. They had put off their flower wreaths and had changed their shoes, but had made no other alteration in their costume. Nanta, in her long blue gown, stood playing the little tune, her wreath laid aside also, her crown of yellow plaits uncovered.

“What a wonderful touch, and what rhythm!” Derek murmured. “Would she play something for us? Some real music?”

Joy laughed. “Our tunes will seem too simple, to you. But they’re lovely for dancing, and some of them are quite beautiful. Nanta must play ‘Hunsdon House’ and ‘Heartsease’. They are some of the best.”

“‘Winifred’s Knot’ is not!” Jen said solemnly. “Oh, we can’t spoil the party! Afterwards you can ask Nanta Rose for some real music. What’s happening over there?”

They were standing unseen in the transept entrance. As the dance ended Elizabeth’s voice rang out in protest. “We look too dreadful! Four greens and two blues! Peggy-Twin, you play, and let Nanta Rose dance with me. Then the colours will be right.”

Margaret dashed to Nanta. “Lend me the fiddle! I’ll be terribly careful! I can play this thing!”

“I hope you can. You couldn’t have an easier tune,” and Nanta gave her the violin. “But the question is, can you play it so that we can dance to it?”

“I can! I know I can! Listen!”

“Oh, that’s all right! Good for you, Margaret! I’ll dance, then; it will certainly look better.” And Nanta went to partner Elizabeth.

Proudly Margaret began to play, and the ring, in alternate blues and greens, went through the dance again.

“How right Elizabeth was!” Jen remarked. “It’s a different thing altogether.”

“She’s very keen on colour.” Joy tried to keep her pride in her daughters out of her voice. “Margaret is playing quite well.”

“Oh, delightfully! When we lose Nanta Rose, Margaret must take her place,” Jen agreed.

“A clever pair,” Derek commented. “That ring certainly looks better now. And Lady Nanta is a very pretty dancer.”

“Joan and Maid are going to join in,” Jen said. “Let’s go too, Joy and Mary. Then they can have some longways. There’s Benedicta in the corner; that will make twelve. You can watch, Mr. Grandison—unless you’re brave enough to have a try?”

"I can't spoil this! Some day I'd like to try; it looks jolly good fun. But I'll see a little more before I barge in," Derek said prudently.

"Mother!" shouted the twins. "Come on! We want to have 'Triumph', but there weren't enough of us. There's no partner for Benedicta."

"We always dance 'Triumph' at weddings," Elizabeth added.

"You danced it for me," and Maidlin held out her hand to Joy. "Lead me through 'Triumph', Joy! I'll be a very meek and humble woman."

Enthralled, Derek watched while Nanta reclaimed her fiddle and played tune after tune, without hesitation and without music.

"She's a marvel!" he said to himself, as "Steam Boat" followed "Triumph" and "Speed the Plough".

"Give us 'The Mary and Dorothy', Nanta Rose," Jen demanded. "That's quiet enough for anything," and she smiled at Mary Dorothy Devine. "It was my first dance, and I had it with Joan, when she was Queen." She held out her hand to Joan.

"Mary-Dorothy, have your dance with me?" Jansy asked.

"Thank you, Janice," and Mary allowed Jansy to lead her into the line.

Then came a square for four and rounds for six and eight, and more longways in between, till the grown-ups declared themselves exhausted after the excitements of the day.

"It's been a nice little party for Mary Damayris," Margaret said. "But she wouldn't have liked it, if she'd been here."

"She wouldn't have danced. Her dancing's quite different," Elizabeth agreed.

"She'd have liked it, all the same, because we've been dancing for her," Rachel assured them. "Aren't you tired, Nanta? You have been good!"

"I'm not tired." Nanta stood holding the fiddle. "Wouldn't the bridesmaids like to go on dancing? What about 'Picking Up Sticks'? Lob knows that!" with a laughing glance at Jansy.

"We'd trip up in the last figure, in these frocks," Jansy retorted. "But we could do 'Althea'. That's nice and quiet."

Two sets danced the square for four, as Rachel and Benedicta declared they did not know it and Mary asked to be excused.

"Do you like our tunes?" Jen looked at Derek. "Or are they too simple and straightforward?"

"They are quite delightful," he assured her. "But there's something strange about many of them. Are they minor? Or are they, by any chance, modal?"

Joy laughed. "Clever of you, Mr. Grandison. They are in the old modes, Dorian and the others. Don't ask me how our country folk and early writers could make such lovely tunes! Jen shall pipe for you; you'll love the morris music. Play 'Princess' for him, Nanta! And 'Lady in the Dark' and 'Beggan Boy'. Then, if you aren't worn out, give us what Mr. Grandison calls 'real music'. He must hear our folk-songs too."

Nanta laughed and played the old tunes, and followed them with "Chanson Triste."

"Nanta Rose, what a choice for a wedding-day!" Jen jeered.

"Oh, but it's nice!" The twins spoke together.

"I'm sorry. I forgot the wedding. That just came into my head, and I love the tune," Nanta apologised.

"Mayn't we have something else, Lady Nanta?" Derek said. "That was beautiful!"

"But very unsuitable!" Jen mocked. "You might at least give us a serenade!"

“I could manage that for you,” and Nanta raised her fiddle again. “But a lullaby for Myonie and Rosemary would be even more appropriate.”

“Lady Nanta, I’m longing to hear you play my stuff,” Derek said earnestly, as they walked through the garden to the cars and saw Joan and Maidlin drive away with their husbands.

Nanta looked at him eagerly. “Will you really let me try? I’ll be proud. I’ll do my very best.”

“Your best must be quite out of the ordinary. Are you going to play in public? You surely should.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Nanta said gravely. “I shall live with my sister in the country, but I want to go on with my music. I don’t get enough time for it just now.”

“Nothing should be allowed to interfere with your music.”

“I’ll do more at it when this term is over. I meant to leave school at Easter, but I seemed to be needed and they asked me to stay on till July. I’m afraid I don’t work very hard—except at music.”

“I’m coming for the week-end, and you and Lady Quellyn are going to try the sonata.”

“While you sit and criticise?”

“Yes, but I crit. the music itself, not the performance of it. There won’t be anything to criticise there,” Derek said, with conviction.

“Don’t be too sure of that!” Nanta laughed.

“Now the next excitement is my beastly exam,” Jansy proclaimed, as they reached the Hall and Jen and Derek said good night.

“An exam, Miss Pigtales? Oh, you’ll pass all right! You’re altogether too bright to fail,” Derek told her.

“I want honours,” she retorted.

“You’ll get them. But you’re wrong about the next event, unless your exam’s to-morrow. The next excitement is when Lady Nanta plays my music on Saturday. I’m going home to fetch it, and then I’m coming to stay with you and your sisters-who-are-really-only-sort-of-cousins for the week-end.”

“You’ll have to play with the twins and the babies. I shan’t have time for you.”

“I shall play with Lady Nanta,” he said hopefully.

“Nanta Rose, I thought you were going to Summerton for the week-end!” Jansy reproached her. “Doesn’t Lady Virginia want you?”

Nanta coloured. “I went to her last week-end. She’ll understand. I want to try Mr. Grandison’s music. I’ll write to Virginia.”

“Now that’s what I call really understanding,” Derek said, with enthusiasm.

But both he and Jansy were wrong about the next event. That came the following morning, when Rachel, in her white working gown, led Derek round the Abbey and told him the stories of the monks.

“But this is wonderful!” He stood on the garth and looked about him. “This calls for music. Has anyone written music about your Abbey?”

“I’ve never heard of any,” Rachel said. “What sort of music do you mean?”

He gazed up at the wide beautiful windows of the refectory and then at the delicate Early; English arches of the chapter-house.

“A romance—for solo violin—so that Lady Nanta could play it; she’d do it marvellously. I’m sure she loves these ruins.”

“She does; they all do. But how could you put it into music?”

“A stately beautiful tune as a basis; all the stories you’ve told me worked in as different themes, with the Abbey tune linking them into a whole. The monks at prayer—solemn music; the Abbot—authority and command; your lay-brother and his Lady Jehane—a love-song, ending sadly; Henry and his soldiers—a turbulent destructive bit, rather terrible; a quiet ending, with your gentle old monk living to a great age in the gate-house, loved by everybody; and the Abbey tune all mixed up with his, to round it off.”

“But could you do all that in music?” Rachel asked, entranced. “How thrilled everyone would be!”

“It would need piano accompaniment, to give the weight for the Henry part; perhaps even an orchestra. It could be done. Whether I can do it or not is another question. How I’d love to try!”

“You ought to do it!” Rachel exclaimed. “It’s your idea. Your uncle, Dr. Grandison, has been here, but he never thought of making music about the Abbey.”

“It didn’t happen to occur to Uncle John; he’ll be interested. I shall have to try! I can’t resist it now.” Derek’s ambition was aroused. “I can hear bits of it already. It will be called *The Song of the Abbey*.”

“I hope you’ll do it,” Rachel said earnestly. “Everybody will love you for ever, if you do.”

“Would Lady Nanta love me for ever?”

Rachel gave him a startled glance. “She might, some day; but not yet. Wait till she grows up!”

“You think it would be too soon to put it into her head? I’m sure Damaris spoke of it to you.”

“Much—years—too soon. I know girls can grow up very suddenly, but Nanta is a long way off that yet. It would be a great pity to hurry her. It’s too soon for you too,” Rachel said vigorously, feeling years older than he. “You only met her yesterday!”

“Yes, but—well, I suppose you’re right, Miss Rachel. I’ll write my music and she shall play it; and I’ll wait till she grows up—if I can.”

“You can, and you must,” Rachel said firmly. “Be good friends as much as you like, but don’t try to rush her into anything more. She’s very sensitive; a real artist. You must know that—you’ve heard her play. If you gave her a shock you might do great harm. And you’d lose her for ever.”

“I can’t risk that,” he said soberly. “Thank you, Miss Rachel. Damaris told me everybody went to you for advice. I seem to have done it too. I’ll keep to music with Lady Nanta. I shall tell her about my *Song of the Abbey* at the week-end. Don’t say anything to her, will you?”

“I won’t say a word to anybody, of course. But if you think you can do it, when you’ve thought it over, tell them soon, for they’ll all be thrilled.”

CHAPTER XXV

THE SONG OF THE ABBEY

On Saturday morning Nanta demanded the music of Derek's sonata, and shut herself into the library with it and her violin for a couple of hours. "I can't possibly play it for you till I've worked at it quietly by myself. It isn't easy to read in manuscript. Please don't come! I don't want it explained to me. I want to see for myself what you've written."

He looked so anxious when he met her at lunch that she took pity on him. "I like it, Mr. Grandison. There are some lovely bits in it. I don't understand it all, but I believe it's very good."

"Bless you for those kind words, Lady Nanta!"

"This afternoon you are all going for a picnic on the hills," Joy said. "I am staying at home to study the sonata. To-night Nanta and I will see what we can do."

It was only when the sonata had been played and approved, with occasional suggestions from Joy and Ivor Quellyn, that Derek told of his new inspiration.

"Uncle John's up in the air about it. I've been thinking it over, and I'm very keen."

"Write it," Ivor said. "It has possibilities. If it's good I'll put it on for you."

Derek looked at Joy and Nanta. "Do you like the thought of it?"

"I like it very much," Joy said emphatically. "I want to hear it."

Nanta had been speechless, but now she found her voice. "It's a glorious idea! Oh, Mr. Grandison, please write it quickly! Our Abbey in music—how we shall all love it! Oh, please, start on it at once!"

Derek took up her violin. "May I? Here is my Abbey theme—my first idea of it, anyway."

"Lovely!" Joy and Nanta spoke together, when he had played a few tentative bars.

He looked at Ivor, who nodded. "Excellent, lad. Keep that running through it. Any more ready yet?"

"This is Lady Jehane. I'm not sure about old Ambrose. I want something really good for him."

"Oh, Jehane's beautiful!" Nanta said earnestly.

"Fascinating," Joy told him. "Go on like that and you'll produce a masterpiece."

"It comes out of your Abbey. If I may, I'll spend some time to-morrow quietly by myself, wandering round."

"And listening to what it tells you," Nanta said, understanding at once. "It is a thrill to know a real composer!"

Derek's lips twitched. "I'm afraid it hasn't come to that yet."

"Did you find anything?" she asked him eagerly, on Sunday night. "Did you find Ambrose?"

"I found a golden cat, who went everywhere with me and enticed me to play with him. Miss Rachel had to come and shut him up."

"Poor Rory! I'm sure he distracted your thoughts."

"Completely, but he's very beautiful. I love the Abbey more and more."

"You'll put Rory in, won't you?" Elizabeth asked anxiously. "He's a real part of the Abbey."

Derek laughed. "We'll give him one little phrase, but it must be a secret, for you people who know Rory. Cats don't really belong to Abbeys."

"They belong to our Abbey," Margaret told him. "We always have cats, and now that Mrs. Nigger has so many families, there are heaps of them."

"I was introduced to Mrs. Nigger, but she was busy with twins in a basket," Derek said seriously.

"Put us in the music too," Margaret coaxed.

"You *or* Rory; not both. We can't have too many people in it."

"No, it would make it messy." Elizabeth understood and agreed.

"Which shall it be? You or Rory?"

"We'll have Rory." The twins spoke together.

"Good! I'll tuck Rory into a corner somewhere."

"Ambrose would be pleased. He loved the 'small people', as he called birds and animals," Joy commented.

"Couldn't you go home at once and start writing the music?" Nanta begged.

Derek groaned. "You're very anxious to be rid of me!"

"I didn't mean that. I'm thinking of The Song of the Abbey."

That was true, he could see; her interest was purely in his work. Some day she would grow up; till then, he must try to satisfy her and produce the music that thrilled her so deeply.

When the girls were starting for school on Monday morning, they made room for him in the car. He apologised for the overcrowding, but they put him in the front seat with Frost and the twins took Mike and Rosemary between them. At the station they shouted their good wishes for The Song of the Abbey.

"Don't forget Rory's bit!" called the twins.

"Don't come back till it's finished!" Jansy cried.

"Oh, please! It will take months. I shall want to see the Abbey again—and all of you, of course! Good luck for the exam, Miss Pigtales! Be a nice Queen, Lady Nanta!"

"Miss Raven wants to speak to Rosalind." Tessa greeted them at the school door.

"What's up?" Nanta dismissed thoughts of unborn music and a pleasant new friend, and became a schoolgirl again.

"I haven't a notion. I hope it isn't anything to do with me," Tessa said anxiously.

"Not at all likely." And Nanta hurried to the Head's study.

"Well, my dear! How are you pleased with the way things are going?" Miss Raven smiled at the tall Queen.

"Everything seems all right, Miss Raven. I hope you don't think there is anything wrong?"

"Not in the least. I am well pleased with Tessa; she is working steadily and she has not tried to take your place as Queen. We are much obliged to you for your help this term. Now would you like to give Tessa her medal before the holidays? I spoke of September, but that means you would have to come back for the ceremony, for you must present the medal, of course. You will be with your sister; how is she, by the way?"

"Very well, thank you, Miss Raven. It's a kind idea," Nanta began.

"It would save you the trouble of coming back. But if you would like an excuse to come to see us, we would wait till September."

Nanta looked at her and smiled. "I would like the excuse. I'll be sorry to say good-bye. Everyone has been so nice to me this term. If Tessa doesn't mind, I'd like to come back in September."

“Good! We shall be glad to see you. Arrange it with Tessa, then. Tell her I am satisfied that she has learnt her lesson and that she can be trusted to be Queen.”

“Thank you so very much, Miss Raven! It will cheer her up to hear that.”

“Oh, thanks be!” Tessa cried, when she heard the message. “I was afraid she had her eye on me for something, though I hadn’t an idea what it could be. But we must wait till September, if that will bring you back, Lavender! The medal’s no use to me during the holidays, though I’d like to feel it’s really mine at last. We’ll start the new term with a visit from you.”

“You’ll come back for crownings, wherever you’re living, won’t you?” Phyl asked anxiously.

“I’ll try. I expect I shall come with Aunt Rosamund,” Nanta promised.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MEDAL FOR THERESA

The autumn term brought Nanta back to the Abbey for Tessa's ceremony. It also brought changes, and good news and bad.

Everyone had hoped to see Littlejan Fraser at the Hall again. It was two years since she had gone to Ceylon to help her mother with the baby sisters, and she had been promised a year or two more at school—as a Cookery Student, since she was now nearly nineteen. But a letter told that the journey must be postponed, at least until Christmas, and this was a great disappointment.

On the other hand, Jansy, her exam honours won, came back for the new term amused and slightly self-conscious in the blouse and skirt of a senior. She had grown so much during the last year that the grown-up costume looked quite suitable, however, and the twins mockingly addressed her as "Miss Raymond".

Nanta came, telling joyfully that she was now an aunt for the second time, as Virginia had given her husband an heir to his baronety. Charles Geoffrey Seymour was a fine baby and everyone was proud and delighted.

"Charles is one of the names in Gilbert's family; Gilbert or Charles or John," Nanta explained. "He's fair, like us, not dark, like Gilbert. Virginia is so pleased with him!"

She had come on Friday afternoon, in time for a Saturday party in the barn, where the Hamlet Club preferred to dance whenever possible. As the ceremony was private, for the Club only, it did not need to take place at school.

"Derek is coming to-morrow," Joy informed her. "He has been working at the Abbey music all these weeks and he wants us to hear the result."

"Oh, good!" Nanta cried. "I want to hear it terribly badly."

"You're going to play it," Joy said. "He won't let anyone else touch it. I shall bring him to the barn, to-morrow afternoon, to see your ceremony; he knows the story."

"He wants to see you being a Queen," Elizabeth explained. "Margaret's going to play for some dances; she's been practising and she's quite good."

"Thanks!" Margaret jeered. "Thank you so much, Miss Elizabeth Marchwood! Playing for dancing is fun."

Nanta had no time to think of Derek, watching from a corner with Joy and Jen, as she waited for Tessa to appear. She was very anxious that the ceremony should be sufficiently important to impress on the Club Tessa's new position as their reigning Queen, so she had decreed full dress for herself and Jansy, with robes and crowns and maids-of-honour.

Margaret, playing with real feeling and excellent rhythm, put down her violin and became an attendant, as Nanta in her shining lavender train came from the dressing-room, wearing a forget-me-not crown, and carrying sprays of sweet scented lavender.

"Oh, lovely lass!" Derek murmured. "What a pretty sight!"

"Jansy is rather choice, too," Jen rejoined. "How do you like her blue robe?"

"Miss Pigtails is a picture," he agreed. "Is this the new Queen?"

Jansy led Tessa, in her vivid lupin train, across the barn, to stand before Nanta, who had seated herself in a big chair, as if on a throne, but now rose to receive her. Tessa's crown was of white flowers, Jansy's of lobelia.

Jansy's maid, Elizabeth, came forward and placed a stool in front of Nanta; Tessa's maid, Phyl, carried a yellow cushion and presented it to the Queen. Nanta took the medal which lay on it, and, as Tessa knelt, she hung it round her neck.

"Hamlet Club friends, Queen Tessa is now your reigning Queen. Her medal calls her Queen Theresa, but she doesn't expect you to say it all the time."

She gave her hand to Tessa and raised her gently. "Congratulations, old girl! We know you'll be a good Queen."

Tessa stood and looked at the Club, her cheeks scarlet. For a moment she faced their cheering greeting; then with a gesture she begged for silence.

"Girls, I will try. Thank you very much! Now, please, three cheers for Queen Lavender, and we hope she'll often come to see us, and always on May-Day."

"I will, if I possibly can," Nanta promised. "Now let's dance and forget all this! Hurry up and change, Jansy and Tessa. It doesn't matter for me; I'm going to play. Margaret must have some dancing."

"It's fun playing. They all have to do what I say," Margaret cried. "I play 'arming', and they arm at once, like good little girls."

The Club laughed, as Nanta held out her hand for her violin.

"It is fun," she agreed. "But you must dance sometimes, or you won't play well."

She pushed back her train on to her shoulders, and began to play "Indian Queen".

When the Club had danced for a couple of hours they went home, escorting Tessa back to town, and Nanta, Jansy and the twins settled down to "real music", at the Hall.

"Now let us hear Rory's bit!" Elizabeth pleaded.

Derek pointed to a line on the music, as he handed it to Nanta. "Remember it's a secret," he warned the twins. "It's only for people who know Rory. You'll hear him dancing about the garth."

The twins clutched one another in ecstasy as they heard the tiny skipping phrase.

"We won't tell anybody about Rory, but we'll always listen for his bit," they assured Derek.

"Keep it for your secret," he said again. "Now, Lady Nanta, will this do for Ambrose?"

"Oh, I do like it, Mr. Grandison!" Nanta cried, when she had played his "Ambrose" theme. "It sounds just like him! How did you think of it?"

"It came," he assured her. "I went into the Abbey and thought about the dear old chap. Lady Joy told me to come whenever I wanted an hour in there."

"To find inspiration," Joy explained. "He comes quite often for a night. Rachel gives him tea and he wanders round and dreams."

"He's found some beautiful music," Nanta said wistfully. "I want to hear it finished."

"I'm afraid that's a long way off," Derek admitted. "But now that you like my main themes I shall get down to it in earnest. When it's complete, will you play it, Lady Nanta?"

"Play it through to you, do you mean? I'd love to, but I'm sure you could do it much better."

"I want to be the audience and hear it as a listener. No, I meant in public. Uncle John says if he's satisfied with it he'll invite his critic friends and a crowd of musical folk and let us give a private performance, to introduce the Song and the sonata. I want you to be the soloist in both."

"I'd be terrified!" Nanta gazed at him in panic. "I shouldn't be good enough!"

“More than good enough,” he said stoutly. “And you wouldn’t be any more frightened than I should. We’d hold hands and suffer together.”

“She wouldn’t play very well, if you were holding her hand,” Jansy jeered.

“I meant before the show began, Miss Pigtales. Neither of us would be frightened once she’d started. She’d be too busy and I’d be enjoying myself too much.”

“Nanta Rose would enjoy herself too,” Joy said. “She’d be very happy introducing The Song of the Abbey to musical London.”

“I’d be tremendously proud. But I can’t think I’d be good enough!”

“You’ve time to get used to the idea,” Joy said. “Derek isn’t nearly ready for you yet. Ask your sister what she thinks!”

Virginia looked thoughtful when Nanta put the idea to her, on her return to Summerton. “That would be an adventure, Nanta dear. I’ve always hoped you would play in public; you’re much too good for only friends. This would be a splendid introduction. We’ll think it over; there’s plenty of time, if Mr. Grandison still has so much work to do on his composition. You wouldn’t really be frightened, you know. You’ve been playing to people since our days with the little orchestra at Rainbows.”

“But that was a very tiny thing. And I haven’t played much lately, except for dancing. I think I’d be terrified.”

“You’re too much of an artist not to be nervous. But once you started you’d be all right. Don’t let the thought of it worry you! You shan’t do it unless you really wish to.”

“He wants to know when I can come to the Hall to hear the new bits. Lady Joy says she’ll always put me up. I thought perhaps I could have those music lessons in Oxford.”

“Yes, we must arrange that. You might have a lesson once every two or three weeks, on Monday mornings, and come home to us later in the day. Then if Mr. Grandison could go to the Hall or the Manor at the same time, you could hear his music—and play it, I suppose—on Saturday or Sunday. Do you like him, apart from his music?” Virginia asked casually.

“Oh yes, very much; he’s nice. And I’m very keen on his ideas.”

Virginia smiled. “Not yet, I think!” she said to herself. “I don’t want to lose my baby sister quite so soon. But perhaps some day! It seems very suitable, and she’d be the making of him in his career. We must wait and see.”

CHAPTER XXVII

THRILLS FOR RACHEL

One day in October Joy rang up Kentisbury Castle.

“Lady Kentisbury herself, please. Oh, Ros! Could you and Geoffrey come to dinner next Saturday?”

“We could, thank you, Joy. But why on a Saturday?”

“Because I want you to inspect Nanta’s young man.”

“Joy Quellyn, what do you mean?”

“Her boy-friend. One of the family should see him, and Virginia can’t come just now. It’s rather a responsibility for Jen and me. We can see what is happening; in fact, we’re helping things along; but we want to be sure her people approve. You and Geoffrey are the heads of the family.”

“Undoubtedly! But—Joy! Do you mean it?”

“He does. She doesn’t, yet.”

“I see. I suppose it’s that young Grandison, whom we met at the wedding and who is writing Abbey music?”

“It most certainly is. She comes here for lessons in Oxford, and he brings his new work and she plays it for him. She thinks only of the music, but he thinks quite as much about her. He adores her.”

“And she’s unconscious of it?”

“Quite, so far. But she’ll wake up some day.”

“I don’t mind Derek Grandison adoring our Rosalind; it’s highly suitable that he should. But I don’t want her thinking of marriage for some time yet.”

“She isn’t thinking of it, but he hopes that she will, presently. Will you come and inspect him?”

“We will. Thank you for suggesting it. I suppose he can afford to marry?”

“We understood from Brian that he had lost his parents and was fairly comfortable as regards funds. And he has the Grandison family behind him; the old people seem to have adopted him, now that Brian has settled in the North. If he makes his name as a rising young composer he should do very well.”

“And Rosalind is to help to make his name! He’s in luck. We’ll certainly come. But we must leave early; it’s a long way home.”

“Will you bring little Mrs. Kane with you?”

“No, Joy dear, I will not. She wouldn’t come.”

“Oh, it’s like that, is it? Give her my good wishes and tell her I invited her. Does she still insist on living in your nurseries?”

“She does. She wears pretty green flowered smocks and pinafores and looks a picture. I coax her to have tea with me now and then, but she’s very happy with the children and very busy. She has made some lovely things; Nanny and the girls are quite thrilled. We’ll see you on Saturday, then. Many thanks!”

Rosamund looked at her niece with delight, when they met for Joy’s dinner-party. “Rosalind, my dear, you’re more like Virginia than ever in that grown-up frock. How well white suits you! But what an elderly niece! We’ve lost our schoolgirl Rosalind.”

“You’ll soon have four more schoolgirls,” Nanta told her. “It’s no use, Aunt Rosamund. They won’t call me Rosalind, and you can’t blame them. They kept mixing us up. How is Baby Geoff?”

“Growing fast. And your little Charles?”

“A beautiful baby. Gilbert loves him. So do Virginia and Nancy Rose.”

“Are we to hear this marvellous new music?”

“You’ll have to ask Mr. Grandison. Lady Joy and I are always ready to play it. It’s for piano and violin at present, but he’s beginning to talk of a small orchestra instead of the piano, and we think he’s right. It needs more than the piano can give.”

Rosamund and Geoffrey approved of the first movement, which was complete, when it had been played for them. But much as she enjoyed the Abbey theme, with its solemn phrases of worship and peaceful meditation, Rosamund’s interest was more in the girl who stood, slim and white and crowned with yellow plaits, playing the leading part.

She nodded to Joy, and as she said good night she gave her verdict. “We approve. But don’t let him, or anyone, hurry her. I hope things won’t go any further for some time. He seems a nice lad, and she’d have a life of music—a very happy thing for her. I’ll have a phone-talk with Virginia and ease her mind. I expect she’s wondering what is to be the end of all this friendship.”

The making of the Abbey Song went on steadily and Derek held out hopes of its being finished by Christmas. The sonata was finished already, but had not been heard by anyone except the Grandisons and the friends at the Hall.

“We’ll introduce them both at once and build a programme round them,” said Dr. Grandison, greatly interested in his nephew’s ambitions. “That child from Kentisbury is brilliant; we must certainly persuade her to play for you. We might ask little Mrs. Robertson to help; you’ll want a singer.”

But while plans for a spring performance were being worked out, another excitement had come to the Abbey.

One November morning Rachel received a parcel. She seized it and ran to her work-room and tore it open.

All day she went about her duties with burning cheeks and shining eyes. Rain was falling steadily, so Benedicta did not come to the garden, but sadly turned to her neglected letter-writing and mending and put in a good day’s work. Rachel had no tourists and no one to speak to, but that did not matter. She spent an intensely happy day and wrote ecstatically to Damaris and went to the post with a parcel.

When she closed the Abbey for the night she ran through the rain to the Hall.

“Mary-Dorothy! Oh, please, Lady Joy, may I speak to Mary?”

“Why, Abbey Lady, what’s the matter? You look more excited than I’ve ever seen you,” Joy exclaimed.

“I will tell you, in just one moment. But I must tell Mary-Dorothy first of all. Oh—Mary!” She thrust a parcel into Mary’s hands.

“What is it?” Mary asked, and then, at sight of Rachel’s face, she guessed. “Oh, Rachel! Your first book?”

“Look at it! It looks so wonderful!” Rachel cried. “I’ve had it since this morning, and I’ve had no one to show it to! I couldn’t phone about it; I had to bring it to you.”

“Oh, Ray, it does look nice!” Mary exclaimed. “Look, Joy! ‘By Rachel Damayris’; that looks nice too. It’s a good name. Is it really for me? But how very kind!”

"It wouldn't have been written, but for you. You stood over me and made me write it."

"Not quite. But I'm very glad I suggested it and that you accepted the idea. How thrilled Jansy and the twins will be, when they come home from school! Is this the first copy you've given away?"

"The second," Rachel laughed. "The first went off to Damaris by to-day's post."

"We are honoured, Mrs. Grandison and I! Have you been gloating over it all day?"

"I tried to work, but I had no visitors, so I kept running to look at my first baby, to be sure it was really there."

"And that it still looked as nice as it did at first." Mary smiled. "Is it dedicated to Damaris? Oh—'To Mary Damayris, my dear sister'. That's lovely, Ray!"

"Let me look!" Joy said. "We're used to seeing Mary-Dorothy's new books, but for one to come out of the Abbey really is a thrill."

"Whoops!" shouted Jansy, when she saw the book. "Oh, Rachel, give me one! I heard you tell it before it was written down!"

"You! You're almost grown-up! Rosemary and Myonie perhaps!"

"I'm not too grown-up for your books!"

"We're not grown-up!" the twins spoke together. "Oh, Rachel, give us one! You told it to us too!"

"One between us would do," Elizabeth said condescendingly. "We don't expect one each."

"I should think not!" their mother scolded. "You ought not to ask, Twinnies. One for our house is enough, and Rachel has given it to Mary."

"Mary-Dorothy's too old to have books like that. It wasn't told to her," the twins urged.

"I'll write for some more copies. I've only six," Rachel explained. "Damaris and Mary-Dorothy have had two, and I suppose I may keep one for myself? I shall give one to Jansy, because she's a Queen and a senior and because she passed her exam so well. I must keep one for Maidlin; she must have it for her little girls, when they grow up. That only leaves one—until I get some more." She looked at the twins with laughing eyes.

"Give it to us!" Margaret begged.

"No, that wouldn't be fair." Elizabeth took a wider view. "We'll have two in the house already. I expect you want to give the last one to Nanta Rose, don't you?"

"I'm going to give it to Lady Jen," Rachel said firmly. "She's not in the least too old for school stories. She can give it to Rosemary, if she likes. As soon as I get more copies, you two shall have one, and if Nanta wants one she shall have it. I think Benedicta must have one too."

"Aunty Ros will want one for all her little girls," Joy said, with a laugh. "You're too generous, Rachel."

"My small cheque will have to be spent on copies of my own book, that's quite plain!"

"Not such a small cheque! For a first book you aren't doing so badly. It's more than I had for my first," Mary told her. "And the cheque isn't the biggest thing, is it, Ray?"

"No, the thing that matters is having a book of my own. But the cheque will be quite useful," Rachel laughed.

"How much do they give you for a book?" Elizabeth asked.

"That doesn't matter to you, Miss Inquisitive," Joy said promptly. "Rachel, I do congratulate you! It looks very nice indeed. I hope it will do well."

"How kind of you!" Rachel exclaimed, her eyes shining.

"How is Number Three coming on?" Mary asked. "I know Number Two is almost typed."

"I'm nearly ready to try it on somebody, if you know any small girls who would care to listen."

"Us!" Margaret shouted. "When can we start?"

"I'm coming too. I'm not a bit too big," Jansy declared.

"You may all come along on Saturday evening," Rachel said hospitably. "We'll see what you think of my new ideas. Now I must fetch another copy and take it to Lady Jen. Perhaps she'll invite Myonie Rose for the night on Saturday."

"You'll write your name in mine, won't you?" Jansy knew all about presentation copies of new books. "I'm going to take it to school and show it to everybody. They'll all want it for Christmas presents. You want people to buy it, don't you?"

"By all means! The more the better."

"Could I buy one, now at once? How soon will the shops have it?"

"I've no idea. But you don't want two copies?"

"I want to send one to Littlejan," Jansy explained. "I can afford it, really. I haven't spent much lately and Mother gives me quite decent pocket-money now."

"That's a kind thought," Rachel said. "But I ought to find one for Marigold, if you think she'd care about it."

"You mustn't spend all your money on your own book!" Jansy protested. "I'd like to give one to Marigold."

"Don't you think Marigold would rather, Rachel gave it to her?" Mary suggested.

"I suppose she would, but it doesn't seem fair to Rachel. We're such a big family!"

Rachel laughed happily. "I've never had anything to give before. I'll send one to Marigold; she can read it on the voyage home, if they start soon."

"She'll be terribly pleased," Jansy said.

"So the Abbey has produced a book as well as a Song!" Jen received her copy joyfully. "I'm very proud, Abbey Lady, and it looks delightful. My warm congratulations! I hope it will be the first of a large family."

The excited letter of thanks from Damaris, for both book and dedication, ended on a jubilant note. "Some day *I* shall have something to show to *you*! Not yet, but next summer. We're going to call her Raimy, short for Rachel Maidlin; we can't use either Ray or Maid, but Raimy Grandison is a good name, and it will be all her own. We'll tell her what it means when she's old enough; she'll be proud of both you and Maidlin. Of course, she may be a little boy! But we're getting very keen on Raimy. Brian has given in, and we'll have Damaris Rose later on; he'll give me anything I want! When are you coming to stay with us? The garden has been lovely. I want you to see what we're making of it."

"I shall go in daffodil time," Rachel said happily.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHRISTMAS PRESENTS FOR BILL

Work on *The Song of the Abbey* went on steadily. As Christmas drew near Derek announced that it was almost finished, and begged for Nanta's presence at the Hall continually, so that she could grow familiar with the music.

"You will be my soloist, won't you?" he asked anxiously.

She looked at him with alarm in her eyes. "I shall be terribly frightened."

"But you wouldn't like anybody else to play our music?" he coaxed.

"No. No, I wouldn't," she admitted. "I'll be frightened, but I'll try, Derek." For some time now "Mr. Grandison" had given place to "Derek", but that, he knew only too well, was merely because everyone else had dropped into the habit of using his first name.

"You'll ask your friends, won't you? Ask anybody you want. Will your sister come? I'd like to see her, and she ought to hear you play."

"I don't know. Baby's still very small: she won't care to leave him. But I'll ask her; I'd like her to hear your music."

"We shall ask Lord and Lady Kentisbury, and everybody from the Hall and the Manor. Can't you think of anyone else?"

"May I ask three people?"

"As many as you like. Who are the chosen three?"

"I'd like to ask Tessa and her mother, and if I may have another, I'd like them to bring Tessa's friend, Phyl."

"Tessa is your present Queen, isn't she? The one who kept you at school all summer, bless her? If you'd been away in Wiltshire and had only come for the wedding, you might never have played my Abbey music."

"The music will mean more to Phyl than to Tessa. Phyl's very keen; she's a good pianist already. She ought to leave school soon, but she may stay on and give more time to music. Her cookery could do with some more work, when there's so much music mixed up with it. Tessa thinks they may both have another year. Phyl will love to hear your music. And Tessa will love the importance of it; the first performance of a new work, and all the well-known people. That sort of thing means a lot to her, and she did have very bad luck about that ballet business. If I may ask her and her mother, it will please Tessa most frightfully."

"By all means. I hope they'll come."

A week before Christmas Jen was called to the telephone to speak to Lady Kentisbury.

"Jenny-Wren? Will you pass the word round for me? Bill's Christmas present has arrived and all's well. We are so much relieved, and so happy!"

"Bill's Christmas—oh, yes! I remember. Oh, good news, Ros! Is it Roger or Rosella?"

There was a laugh in Rosamund's voice as she replied, "It's both, Jenny-Wren."

"*What?*" Jen shouted. "You don't mean——?"

"This poor telephone! How you do scream into it! Yes, I mean just that. As I said to Patricia, she shouldn't have married into our family unless she was prepared to have twins. We kept it for a surprise for you."

"But do you mean she's had them mixed—boy and girl?"

"I do. Hasn't she been clever? She was a little bit afraid of having two boys or two girls; boys particularly seemed rather a handful"—as Jen gave a cry of protest. "But one of each doesn't seem so formidable, for some reason. She's reconciled to having two."

"I should think she is! We'd all have liked mixed twins; she's the first of us to manage it. I'm wildly jealous; tell her so!"

"I'll tell her, but why? You were so terribly anxious to have two boys!"

"I'd have liked a mixed pair as well; it must be lovely to have boy and girl! If Babbie Rose had had a twin brother I'd have been thrilled."

"Oh, *Jen!*" Rosamund laughed in protest. "You're never satisfied—you want everything! Aren't eight children enough?"

"Kenneth seems to think so. Tell Mrs. Kane how much I envy her! She's a minx, to get ahead of us all like this. Are they really Roger and Rosella?"

"Roger Geoffrey Kane and Rosella Rose Kane. Patch insists on my being godmother and on calling Rosella 'Rose' as well. At first I said it was too heavy, too rosy altogether! But now I rather like it."

"It's a pretty name. I suppose when she marries she'll have Lady Rosella's historical old collar?"

"I've told Patricia, Rosella must marry our Geoff and bring the emeralds back into the family. But as she's only a few hours old, her mother thinks I'm speaking of it too soon."

"She might prefer Hugh. That would make her Lady Kentisbury one day."

"Hugh is to marry one of Maidlin's little girls," Rosamund said firmly.

"Oh, Ros! You have arranged it all! When can I see Rosella and Roger?"

"Soon. Patch will want to show them off. She's really thrilled and proud. Roger came first; don't put them backwards!"

"Roger and Rosella. Is she feeling bad because she can't show them to Bill?"

"Yes, Jen. But there's no help for that. We've cabled, and radioed. He'll have the news quite soon. And we shall send photos. Jack Raymond has promised to make some of his beautiful studies of the family; they'll be real pictures. He sympathises very much with Bill and Patricia."

"Poor young things! It's hard to be separated. But that ship won't hold Bill! He'll be too proud for words. Any hope of getting him home?"

"Not yet, I think. I want him to stay at home and bring up his family now."

"Yes, he ought to do that. It's not as if he needed to have a career. He's been lucky to have you to take care of his wife! I'm quite sure you've mothered her for all these months."

"I don't feel like the mother of a girl of twenty-four! But I've felt the responsibility of having her here, of course. She thought she'd be too much trouble to us and that she ought to go to a nursing home to have the babies, and she hated the thought of it. The poor child nearly wept when I said she must stay here. But, as I told her, where should little Kanes be born, but at Kentisbury? It cheered her up a lot to know she could stay with us."

"With you all rallying round and taking care of her. I bet it did! You have been good to her, Ros! Will she stay with you till Bill comes home?"

"I think not. Now that this is safely over she ought to have her own house. I wanted to see her through, but now I've a plan for her—for them!—and she seems to like it. We're going to lend her the Dower House and let Miss Lillie Lillico take care of them. The house is standing empty, and it's entirely suitable that she should bring up her little Kanes there, right in the park and within sight of our windows. We shall lend her one of our nurses, so that she won't feel

burdened with two children on her hands; we can get more help, if necessary. Patch and Hyacinth and Lilac are such good friends; she'll love having one of them."

"That's really generous. You might very well keep your own two and find someone new for her."

"She'd rather have a friend than a stranger. Perhaps we shan't need anyone. Roddy is going to prep. school soon, and we may have a young tutor to prepare him and to look after Hugh."

"He'll fall in love with Hyacinth and Lilac."

"Not with both, I hope. Hyacinth has a friend already; he can have Lilac, if he likes. I must ring off, Jen."

"Wait a moment!" One of Jen's famous shrieks came along the wire. "Quick, tell me, Ros! Have the twins got their mother's pretty hair?"

Rosamund laughed. "That's the first question everybody asks. Geoffrey—Nanny—the girls—the maids—all said: 'Have they got their mother's pretty hair?'"

"Well, have they? You'll be cut off in a moment and then I shall have to ring you, to find out."

"Patch has been very clever—or very lucky. Roger is a real little Kane and will be just like Bill. He might be our Geoff as an infant; fair hair, blue eyes. Rosella's lovely; tiny red rings and twists of curls, just like her mother's. She'll be another Patricia."

"Oh, good! Those curls would have been wasted on a boy. *How* pleased Bill will be!"

"He wanted a boy like Roddy, and he's got him. And I'm quite sure he wanted a girl like Patch. So all's well and everyone is satisfied. She was stunned when she saw them; she keeps looking at them to make sure there's no mistake. She thought twins had to be exactly alike, as ours and Maid's and Joy's and yours all are. Two quite different children startled her. But her uncle put her right about that; you don't have identicals with boy and girl twins. My time's up! Tell the family about Roger and Rosella! Maidlin knows; I spoke to her this morning."

"Most gladly will I tell them," Jen responded, and rang up Joan and Joy to tell them the good news.

CHAPTER XXIX

A TREAT FOR TESSA

Tessa received Nanta's invitation with almost awed delight. "Rosalind, you angel! I know Mother will come. Phyl too? Oh, you are a brick! Who will be there? We'll see the new composer, of course?"

"He'll be there, if he's not too frightened," Nanta said seriously. "He says he'll probably run away. But that would let everybody down badly, and especially me."

"Are you really going to play his music for the first time? Aren't you nervous?"

"The first time in public. I've been playing it all autumn. I'm terrified, but I expect I shall pull through. Derek and I are going to hold hands and shiver till the moment comes."

"Do you have an orchestra?" Phyl asked, her face alight with eagerness.

"A string orchestra. The Song of the Abbey can be played with just the piano; that's how I've worked on it, with Lady Joy. But it's better with a small orchestra; I'm going to have some practice with them, in town." She looked at Phyl. "Dr. Grandison will take the piano part in the sonata, so you'll hear him play."

"Oh, cheers! I'll love to see him!"

"And Mrs. Robertson is singing," Nanta added.

"Queen Maidlin!" Tessa gave a shout. "Fancy hearing her at a real concert!"

Maidlin, begged by John Grant Grandison to sing, had at first demurred. "I've a much better plan. Lindy Bellane is almost ready for a first appearance. Couldn't she be your singer? You could introduce her, and Rosalind Kane, and Derek Grandison, all at the same time. People are used to me! You don't think it would do?"—as Dr. Grandison shook his head.

"Better not," he said. "Too many novelties at one time. We must arrange something for your little soprano; her voice is beautiful and she must have her chance. But we want to fix all the interest on our two young folks—composer and violinist. She would be overshadowed by the new music; it wouldn't be fair to her. If you will sing for us, and if your husband will bring his viola, and if I come in with a Chopin Nocturne or two, we shall do very well and all the limelight will be centred on Derek and Lady Rosalind. You and I and Jock are all too well known to take attention off the youngsters. But bring your little singer and we'll introduce her to people; it will be a help when her time comes."

So Maidlin gave in and promised to sing and to make Jock play a solo.

Virginia, desperately anxious to hear Nanta play and to see Derek Grandison at last, yet did not see how she could leave a four-months-old baby for a night. But Rosamund swept the difficulty aside.

"Of course you must be there, Virginia; don't be silly! It would be horribly hard on Rosalind, if you didn't come. You'll all come to Kentisbury for the night; you and Gilbert, Nurse and baby, and little Nancybell. My good Nanny will love to have you and will give any help you need, and you'll leave Baby Charles in her hands when we go to town for the evening. We shan't be very late; it's not a long affair, though it's rather choice and extremely important! Rosalind will be at the Hall for a few days, for final rehearsals, but we'll bring her back with us and you can take her home to Summerton. You'll want to talk it over with her."

"I want to talk over other things too," Virginia rejoined. "This friendship has deepened and strengthened during the autumn."

“There’s no doubt she likes Derek Grandison quite a good deal,” Rosamund agreed. “But it doesn’t go further than that at present, I think. Don’t frighten her! Come to us early in the day, so that you can rest before setting out for town. Come the day before, if you like. You must see our new twins; we’re very proud of them. Patricia is terribly annoyed that she can’t go to town with us. She has a very soft place in her heart for Rosalind, who welcomed her to Kentisbury and made her feel at home when she was shy and rather frightened of Geoffrey and me. She’d have liked to hear her play, but it really is too soon. You must come, Virginia! I won’t let you off. Not go to Rosalind’s first concert? I never heard anything sillier!”

“You’re very kind, Aunt Rosamund,” Virginia laughed. “I’ll talk to Nurse. I shall have to coax her into letting Baby take the journey.”

Patch was bitterly disappointed that she must stay at home, but she had to admit that the trip to town and back would have been too tiring. She looked at her red-haired daughter and fair little son, still amused by the difference between them, and acknowledged that they were worth staying at home for. And she looked, as she had done so often, at Bill’s ecstatic cable—*Hurrah! Love from Daddy. Proud of all three. Bill*—and re-read his delighted letters, and comforted herself with these when the car had driven away and she was left alone.

Dr. Grandison had opened his fine music-room for the occasion, and with folding doors to the large drawing-room thrown wide it made a very good hall. He had invited friends and critics from the musical world, but had reserved seats for the parties from the Hall and the Manor, from Kentisbury and from the Pallant. The Abbey crowd turned up in force, their interest equally divided between The Song of the Abbey and Nanta’s rendering of it. Jansy and the twins were there, though Rosemary had been considered too young for music with no dancing or singing connected with it; and they waved their programme notes vigorously as Tessa and her mother and Phyl came in.

“Come and sit with us!” Jansy slipped out and met them at the door. “We’ve kept places for you; Dr. Grandison said Rosalind’s friends must have good seats! She’s over there, with Derek. She looks frightened, doesn’t she?”

“She said they were both going to be frightened, but that they’d hold hands and pull through that way,” Tessa said. “She looks marvellous; she’s always lovely in white. Tell me who everybody is, Jansy! I expect you know them all. Will there be bits in the papers about it?”

“Sure to be. I hope they’ll say nice things about Derek and Nanta Rose.”

“I wish they’d start,” Nanta was whispering, in an agony of nervousness.

“It’s almost time,” Derek said, looking definitely frightened.

“I wish our things could come first, so that we’d get them over. I shan’t be able to enjoy the songs or the other music.”

“We’re much too important for that,” he told her gloomily. “What else do you wish? That you weren’t going to play?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I’d hate to hear it messed up, and you’ve told me just what you want. I won’t spoil it, Derek.”

“I know you won’t, bless you!” he rejoined. “I’m absolutely happy about the way you’ll play it. It’s whether they’ll like the stuff itself that is worrying me.”

“Then you should stop. They couldn’t help liking it.”

“What are we so frightened about?” He began to laugh. “I’m sure about your part and you’re sure about mine. Can’t we trust one another’s judgment?”

“I’m not sure that I shall satisfy you and your uncle. So much depends on the violin.”

“Everything,” he agreed. “That’s why no one must play it but you.”

“Derek’s made Nanta Rose laugh,” Jansy whispered. “That will cheer her up. I wonder what he said?”

“That must be the violinist, Rosalind Kane,” said a lady sitting near them. “I believe she is really Lady Rosalind, though it doesn’t say so on the programme. She’s very young! I wonder if she is good enough for a task like this?”

“She’s very handsome, and very like the family,” said her companion. “Lord and Lady Kentisbury are over there, with a fair girl who must be another Kane. They are all very much alike. And those children must be the Quellyn twins.”

“Marchwood twins.” Her friend was better informed. “They are Lady Quellyn’s first family; their father was the explorer, Sir Andrew Marchwood. There’s an older girl, who is very like them; do you see?—with long plaits of that lovely red hair. I wonder who she is? Not a sister; the twins were the only ones in the first family. Oh, look! With Dr. and Mrs. Grandison! Surely that is young Mrs. Grandison, who was Mary Damayris, the dancer?”

Damaris had been talking to Rachel and Benedicta, and now she accosted Derek. “Don’t think I’ve come all this way for the sake of your music! I’ve come to hear Nanta Rose play it, which is quite different.”

“You’ll like the Abbey Song,” and Nanta smiled doubtfully at her. “I’ll try to do it justice.”

The orchestra took their places and the audience hurriedly slipped into their seats. Derek drew Nanta to the back of the small platform, and became suddenly encouraging.

“No more waiting; it will soon be over. Gosh! I’m thankful you’re here to play my stuff! I don’t feel in the least alarmed about it now.”

Nanta gave him a small brave smile. “I’ll do my very best.”

“Then my fortune’s made,” he told her, and she smiled again.

CHAPTER XXX

NANTA PLAYS THE ABBEY SONG

The orchestra broke into a gay suite by Holst, and Jansy and the twins beamed with joy and could hardly sit still when the last movement began, while their elders looked at them and smiled in sympathy, for they had all danced to this little tune. Dr. Grandison's group of Chopin Nocturnes were so beautiful that later on Nanta realised it was during them that she had forgotten to be frightened. Maidlin sang several of Joy's songs, to the delight of everybody.

"All in the family, and very nice too," said more than one in the audience. "Those songs are quite charming."

Then Nanta, looking rather white and grave, stood by the piano, violin in hand, and pointed out to Dr. Grandison certain places in the music and told him just what she wanted. He nodded and made a note or two; she raised her fiddle and began the new sonata.

As Virginia had foretold, her nervousness left her as soon as she started to play. Her touch grew more assured, her notes stronger; she no longer saw the audience, but was lost in the music. It was four years since she had played with the little orchestra at Rainbows Village; she had gained immensely in power and confidence.

"She's all right now," said Virginia's eyes, as she looked happily at Rosamund.

Rosamund nodded, then kept her eyes fixed on the slim white figure which was producing such wonderful sounds.

Jansy and the twins grinned at one another as a blue ring flashed on Nanta's busy finger. The music was rather beyond them, but the sight of that ring made them very happy.

"And that's that!" Jen Marchwood murmured, under cover of the thunderous applause. "Nanta Rose's name is made as a violinist. I wonder if she'll go on?"

"Lovely, Nanta dear!" Virginia said eagerly, when Nanta and Derek had bowed time after time, and at last Nanta was free to come to her as the interval began.

"Was it all right? It's beautiful, isn't it, Virginia? I enjoyed playing it. You'd like to play it too."

"Tired?" Rosamund smiled at her. "I hope not too exhausted to play the Abbey music?"

"I'll be all right. I'm not so much afraid about the Abbey Song. I shall forget everything and go right away into the Abbey," Nanta confessed. "People won't matter there. I was much more frightened of the sonata. But they seem to have liked it. Derek's being congratulated by all the big people! I must go and speak to Tessa and Phyl; they're my visitors."

"A good hostess," Rosamund told her, with approval.

"Speak to us, Nanta Rose!" Jansy cried. "Or are you too important now?"

"We're proud to know you, Lady Rosalind," said Elizabeth.

"It was marvellous of you to wear your Queen's ring," said Margaret.

"I love my Queen's ring," and Nanta stood with them for a few minutes, and then went to speak to Tessa.

"Rosalind, it was lovely," Phyl said wistfully. "I don't know how you can play like that!"

"Jolly nice of you to come to us! Makes me feel two feet taller," Tessa said in delight. "Mr. Grandison looks frightfully jolly. I suppose you know him awfully well?"

“We’ve worked together a good deal, preparing for this evening. I’m glad the sonata’s over; I was nervous about it. I did want it to be well received. People seem to like it.”

“You were wonderful, my dear. You’ve made Derek’s name to-night.” Dr. Grandison came to Nanta and Derek followed, bringing coffee. “We are very grateful to you.”

“Was it all right?” Nanta asked anxiously. “I loved playing his music.”

“Isn’t this your rebellious Queen?” Derek remembered the ceremony in the barn.

Shyly, Nanta introduced Tessa and Phyl, and Dr. Grandison said a kind word to each and then moved away, leaving them speechless with delight.

Jansy slipped out of her place and crept to her mother’s side. “Change seats with me, Margaret. Please move along, Aunt Joy. I want to sit with Mother for the next bit. Do you mind? It’s about our Abbey.”

Joan smiled at her, as Joy readily moved into Margaret’s vacant place. “Our Abbey especially, isn’t it, Janice? I’m looking forward to it very much.”

“Oh, so am I! But it may make me feel a bit queer.” And Jansy tucked herself in close to Joan.

“So that’s who she is! That must be her mother; a sister of Lady Quellyn, apparently,” said the interested onlooker.

Presently Jock Robertson and his viola took possession of the dais, and then Maidlin sang again. Then came the moment for which Nanta’s friends were waiting, as she stood with the small orchestra to play the Song of the Abbey.

Virginia knew at once that what she had said was true. She was no longer nervous; she was far away, wandering in the Abbey and describing it to all these people who did not know it. The peace of the cloister garth, the beauty of the refectory; the monks going from the dormitory by the night stair to worship in the great church, the pastoral life in farm and garden, the care of the sick in the infirmary; then the turbulent breaking in of Henry’s men, ruining the peaceful life of work and prayer, the wistful love-story of Jehane and Ambrose, the tragedy of their unfulfilled romance and of her early death, the long wandering of Ambrose and his return to peace and sanctuary at last, and his years of happy old age in the quiet gate-house—the stories were all there, and Nanta poured out her heart with them, as she told them to these strangers. The programme notes gave some help in understanding, and those with imagination heard more in her music.

Those who knew and loved the Abbey heard most of all and were deeply moved. Jansy’s hand crept into her mother’s and her lips were quivering. Joan squeezed her fingers and smiled at her, and looked across at Jen with shining eyes. Rachel’s eyes were very bright too, and Benedicta’s face lit up in excitement, as a little happy movement suggested flowers and sunshine and a garden, and robins flying into the sanctuary of the rose window. The twins smiled proudly at one another as they heard the secret skipping phrase which stood for Rory and Mrs. Nigger and the kittens.

In a corner Derek held his breath; he had not known the Song was quite so beautiful. To him, but unknown to Nanta, it held thoughts of their days in the Abbey together, when they had planned the work and talked of the stories; and his already deep feeling for her coloured his listening and ran all through the music.

Then it was over, and a moment’s expressive silence was broken by a roar of applause and delighted cries for the composer.

Nanta came to earth with something of a shock. Virginia, knowing her, understood and held out her hand in an invitation. With a hasty bow Nanta went quickly to her side and smiled

to Derek to come forward to take his call.

Derek had other ideas, however. He ran to her and seized her hand. "Come and take your share! It was all you! You were marvellous!" and he led her back to the platform.

"A most attractive pair!" Tessa heard someone say, as the two bowed, hand in hand. "They ought to make a match of it."

"It would be a great thing for music, if they did," a friend rejoined, as Tessa looked in sudden excitement at Phyl.

The Abbey twins, prompted by Dr. Grandison, had slipped out. Now they came back, each hidden by a huge sheaf of early daffodils, and presented one to Nanta and one to Maidlin.

"Good! That's a kind thought!" Rosamund said heartily.

"Oh, how lovely! Spring!" Nanta cried. "It's wonderful to see them so early!" and over the flowers she smiled her thanks to Dr. Grandison.

"Nanta's about done," Virginia said to Rosamund. "How soon can we rescue her from all this excitement? I know how much she can stand and there's a limit. I don't want her to collapse."

"We must give them a few minutes. Everyone will want to speak to her; our crowd, I mean."

Joy was thanking Maidlin for her songs. Dr. Grandison, beaming and happy, came to Rosamund to congratulate her on her niece and was introduced to Virginia and Gilbert.

"I want to take Nanta—I mean Rosalind!—home, Dr. Grandison. This has been almost too much for her," Virginia urged. "Can you help me?"

Nanta was surrounded now by Abbey friends. The twins thumped her on the back; Jansy flung her arms round her and hugged her. Tessa and Phyl watched wistfully, but kept in the background and presently went home without trying to speak to her.

Joan thanked her warmly for the lovely sound-pictures of the Abbey. "We could see it all as you painted it in music for us. Jansy and I were holding hands in great joy," she said.

"It's Derek you must thank," Nanta protested. "I only played what he had written."

"But *how* you played it!" Derek said, behind her. "I didn't know there was so much in it. You made it sound more wonderful than I had ever dreamed."

"Is that true?" Joan asked, with interest. "Did you really find things in it which you hadn't realised were there?"

"Most certainly I did. I was discovering new beauties all the time. I can never thank Lady Nanta properly."

"Nanta, come home!" Virginia commanded. "We're waiting for you. You must thank her another time, Mr. Grandison. I don't want her knocked up, and she is more tired than she knows. The excitement of all this will go suddenly and she'll be ready to collapse. Come home and rest, Nanta dear!"

CHAPTER XXXI

NANTA IS WILLING

“Now not a word from you, Nanta!” Virginia said, as the car set out on the long drive to Kentisbury. “You were quite wonderful and we were more than proud. But we’ll say all that to-morrow. You’re worn out; keep quiet, and sleep, if you can.”

“Please let me speak to Aunt Rosamund! May I see the new twins?”

“To-morrow,” Rosamund promised, glad to see her thoughts could turn to something new. “Patricia is longing to show them to you. But they’re all in bed by now. Roger and Rosella can wait till the morning.”

“And so can Charles and Nancybell,” Virginia agreed. “We’ll have no visiting of babies to-night. But I’ve one piece of news for you. Margery Paine has a little girl—you know she married David Woodburn last year? We heard this morning.”

“That’s lovely news!” Nanta’s face lit up. “I’d like to see Margery’s baby!”

“We must both go some day. She’s to be called Margery Rose.”

“Oh, that’s pretty! Is Rose for you, Aunt Rosamund? Or is it for all of us? When Margery knew us first we let her think our surname was Rose.”

“Yes, you were silly girls, weren’t you? I think it’s for both. I’ve said I’d like to be godmother to Margery’s baby; she seemed pleased.”

“Your dozens of godchildren, all called Rose!” Nanta laughed.

“Don’t talk any more,” Virginia commanded, “You can think about Margery’s baby. It’s bed for you as soon as possible, Nanta dear.”

Nanta could never withstand Virginia, and least of all when she was backed up by Rosamund. She relapsed into silence and lay resting in her corner, nursing her daffodils and eating chocolates presented by Derek, while the others talked of how pleasant it had been to see Damaris again, looking so well and happy—of Maidlin’s beautiful singing and Jock’s solos—of how much they all liked Derek Grandison. Nanta smiled in her corner, but knew better than to join in.

She was sent off to bed as soon as they reached the Castle, and went gladly, realising how she ached all over with the nervous tension of the evening. Virginia herself brought in her supper; and kissed her good-night.

“You were quite wonderful, dear,” she said again. “You must be prepared to play The Abbey Song often, for I’m sure the Grandisons will wish it. Other people will play it, but to Derek Grandison and his uncle it will always belong to you.”

“I love it. I want to belong to it,” Nanta replied. “I’m glad you were pleased, Virginia.”

“I was very proud. I’ve always hoped you would play to real audiences. You have made The Abbey Song yours to-night. Soon I expect you’ll be playing it in the Albert Hall! Now go to sleep! To-morrow we’ll go home.”

Before they set out for Summerton there were visits to be paid; to the Kentisbury boys and girls and Baby Geoff, and to Patricia and her new family.

“You said you’d like to have one of your own,” Nanta said, looking from tiny Rosella to her mother. “You’ve got two. The little girl is just like you.”

“I didn’t want to start with two,” Patricia admitted. “It seemed rather alarming. But now that they’re here I love them both and I wouldn’t part with either of them. And their daddy is

so pleased and proud!”

“They’re darlings. I’m so glad for you,” Nanta said earnestly.

She held Nancybell Rose on her knee as they drove to Summerton during the afternoon. “Isn’t it odd, Virginia?” she said suddenly.

“Isn’t what odd, my dear? You are unexpected sometimes!”

“All these babies; these new families, coming from nowhere. I think they’re wonderful.”

Gilbert, driving the car, grinned in amusement, and Nurse smiled at Baby Charles in her arms.

Virginia looked at her young sister thoughtfully. “Very wonderful, Nanta dear. But very nice!”

“Oh, yes! I love them when they’re tiny.”

“Come and look at Baby,” Virginia said that evening. “He’s just had his supper and he’s sleeping so beautifully.”

They went together to the nursery and looked down at the heir to Summerton in his cot.

“He’s one of the nicest of all the babies.” Nanta’s thoughts went back to the conversation in the car.

“Because he’s ours. Nanta dear, I want to ask you something.”

Nanta gave her a startled look. “What’s it about?”

“I like Derek Grandison. I want to know him better. Shall I ask him to come and stay with us?”

“That would be fun,” Nanta began. “I’d like you to know him properly.”

“You ought to know him better too.” Virginia chose her words carefully. “I suppose you’ve talked to him about nothing but music?”

“It was mostly about music.” Nanta gave her a small smile.

“Music is good, but it isn’t everything. You ought to stay in the same house with him and see him all the time and have chances of talking about other things. Then you really will know him better.”

“I’d like that. But——” Nanta sat gazing at Baby Charles, and paused.

“But what, Nanta dear?”

“What other things will he want to talk about?”

“Do you think there’s anything special he’ll want to say?” Virginia asked quietly, looking at her sister’s downbent face.

“I’ve sometimes wondered—if there might be something.”

“I’ve no doubt of it,” Virginia said promptly.

Nanta looked up quickly. “I don’t want anything like that yet, Virginia.”

“Of course not. He wants it, but you aren’t ready. He must wait.”

“You really do think he wants—that?”

“Nanta dear, I know he does. But you don’t know him well enough yet. I want you to have a chance to get to know him. But I won’t ask him here unless you would like it.”

There was a long silence. Virginia waited hopefully.

At last Nanta raised her eyes. “I’d like to know him better. Thank you for understanding, Virginia. Please ask him to come.”

And Virginia came round to her side of the cot and kissed her.

CHAPTER XXXII

A SONG OF RAINBOWS

It seemed to Derek that his soloist was shy, when he came joyfully in response to Virginia's invitation, a few days later. At first Nanta was thoughtful, and quieter than usual, as if she had something on her mind. But he came laden with newspaper cuttings, many of which she had not seen, and in discussion of the comments and criticisms she forgot and became herself again.

Virginia said no more and gave him no hint to ease his mind, but left matters to work out in their own way, watching with sympathy as the two walked and rode together, sometimes with Gilbert and herself but more often alone.

"My Nanta is learning a new lesson very quickly," she thought. "But that's as it should be. I'm sure she's happy, and she'll soon be happier still."

Derek was full of plans for new music—a violin concerto, in which Nanta would play the leading part. The critics had been friendly; his sonata had pleased everyone, and *The Song of the Abbey* was hailed as a fine piece of work. "For the soloist, Lady Rosalind Kane, we have nothing but praise. She is a great discovery and a welcome recruit to the concert platform. We hope to hear her again before long," said the papers.

Nanta flushed and laughed. "It's very, nice of everybody. I enjoyed it, after the first minute or two."

Derek told how Ivor Quellyn was anxious to include *The Song of the Abbey* in one of his summer concerts, and Nanta agreed that she could not bear to let anyone else take the solo part.

"I said we should soon hear it, and you, in the Albert Hall," Virginia commented. "You'll do it all right! You made your own name as well as Derek's that night."

Derek's first visit was followed by another, for Virginia and Gilbert had made him feel he was welcome. Then, soon after Nanta's twentieth birthday, he arrived in a small new car.

"I've been driving for years in South Africa," he explained. "Now we shall be able to go farther afield, without begging for Gilbert's help. You'll trust Nanta to me, won't you, Lady Virginia?"

"Go out once with Martin"—who was the trusted and experienced chauffeur. "If he passes you as a safe driver you shall take Nanta where you like," Virginia said.

Derek laughed, and submitted to the test, satisfying the critical Martin completely. Then, with a big picnic basket on board, he drove Nanta off to the sea or to explore the Cotswolds or the West Country, and she came home flushed and bright-eyed, learning her new lesson very quickly.

"Something's happened," Virginia said to her husband one night. "I'm sure of it. But we'll wait till they tell us."

"I should have thought young Nanta would come rushing to tell you at once."

"I don't come first with Nanta now. But she'll tell us soon."

The car drove off in a new direction next morning, going east, instead of west or south. In the late afternoon the pair came racing back, and Nanta ran to find Virginia.

"Oh, Virginia! Do you remember what I once said?—That there was no point in getting married since I'd still have to be called 'Lady'? And you said there was more in it than that,

but I must wait till I found out? Well, I have. And there is!” And she threw herself into Virginia’s arms.

“Then all’s well! Oh, my dear, I am so glad!”

“He asked me yesterday,” Nanta cried. “To-day we’ve been to Rainbows. We’re going to live there, in a tiny house. I don’t want a big place; I want to play at house-keeping in a cottage. We can run up to town easily in the car, and it’s not far from Kentisbury. We can come to you quite quickly too, if we go by road. Oh, Virginia, Rainbows is beautiful now! It’s four years since we were there, and the new trees have grown, and it doesn’t look bare and ragged any more. Derek loved it; he wants to have a cottage there. Every garden has those double flowering cherry trees, and the whole place is a sea of pink and red and white. You never saw anything like it! And the bluebells are making that glorious mist under the trees. It looks quite lovely! We didn’t speak to anybody or go to see Margery; we wanted to tell you first. We just looked at the clouds of red and pink blossom, and the blue carpet, and we both knew we wanted to live there, so we came racing home to tell you. But we aren’t going to be married yet. I want to wait, and enjoy thinking about it.”

“Oh, yes! You must play with Derek for a while, before you settle down as an old married lady. I like the Rainbows idea,” Virginia said heartily. “You’ll be very happy there.”

She held out her hand to Derek. “I’m so very glad for you both. And what lovely music you will write, for Nanta to play to the world!”

“We think perhaps he’ll write a Song of Rainbows some day,” Nanta said happily.

THE END

[The end of *The Song of the Abbey* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]