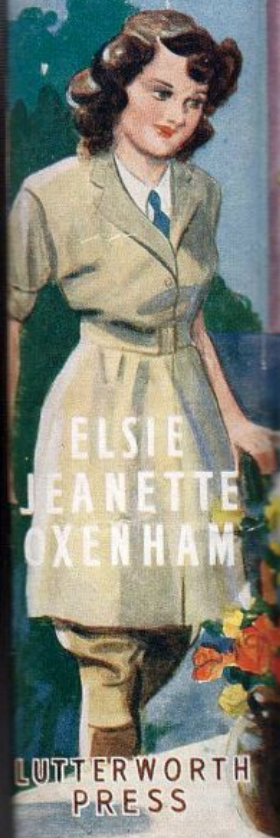


ROSAMUND'S
TUCK-SHOP

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ELSIE
JEANETTE
OXENHAM



ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

LUTTERWORTH
PRESS

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"Will you please get off the counter?" she said, polite but definite. See page [74](#).

ROSAMUND'S TUCK-SHOP

A SCHOOL STORY

BY
ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

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CHAPTER 1.

A GEM OF A TUCK-SHOP

‘For the last time, Peters; the last time till Christmas,’ and Rhoda took the steering-wheel from the chauffeur.

She was seventeen, and it was her own car. She had been driving for some time, but always with Peters in attendance. Cars were not allowed at school, however; not even at such a school as the one to which she was returning. It was good-bye to Peters and her treasure until the Christmas holidays.

Her mother, Lady Verriton, was making plans for a three-months’ trip to Durban and the Cape, travelling with her sister. Rhoda, given the choice of school or South Africa, had chosen school. She had spent the last few months at home, in tragic circumstances, and she was longing to be with her friends again. While her presence had been any comfort to her mother, she had been willing to stay and do what she could; but with her mother safely launched on her voyage and in good company, Rhoda gladly turned from the gloom of the great Castle and set her face to the future and a joyful meeting with her chums.

Her father had died three years ago, just before her grandfather, the old Earl of Kentisbury. The eldest son of the Earl, his death had left her only brother, Geoffrey, to be the new Earl. Geoff had been a year younger than herself, and had been rather bored by his title. He had been the Earl for a year, and then—Rhoda pulled herself up. No use going over it all again. Geoff had been as keen on his motor-cycle as she was on her two-seater, but he had refused to have Peters or anyone in attendance. It had always been difficult to manage him; during this last year even her mother had found it almost impossible. He had been at home from Eton for a few days, and had brought a chum with him. They had gone out on the cycle at night, unknown to Lady Verriton.

Rhoda shuddered as she remembered her desperate unbelief in the tragedy, the race home to her mother, the loss of all hope. Geoff was gone; it seemed incredible, even now. He had been so full of life, such a jolly companion; they had meant to do so much together.

‘I’ll have to marry, of course,’ he had said airily. ‘But you and I will have a good time first, Rho. We’ll scour the world and have some fun.’

How she had looked forward to it! And now——! Geoff had had his own way; he had always been like that.

‘Gently, my lady!’ the chauffeur’s voice broke in on her dream.

Rhoda’s brake screeched, as she drew up at a corner to let a small car pass.

‘Bother! What a beastly row!’

‘Too fast,’ said Peters in reproof. ‘Our fault, my lady; you should have slowed down sooner.’ He had taught her to drive and was always frankly annoyed when she forgot his instructions.

‘They were going too fast,’ Rhoda argued.

‘Not too fast for a main road. We were coming out too fast,’ Peters said firmly.

‘Did you notice the suit-case on the back?’ Rhoda changed the subject. ‘The initials were the name as mine. Another Rhoda Kane perhaps! I’ll be more careful, Peters; I know it was my fault. I was thinking of something else.’

‘Better let me drive, my lady,’ Peters suggested.

Rhoda groaned. 'That's one for me! I'll think of nothing but the car and the road, I promise.' And she tried to banish thoughts of past and future for the moment.

Her face was sombre as she gazed steadily at the road ahead and steered the little car with the lightest touch on the wheel. Would the girls understand? Or would they want to talk about her trouble? Her own crowd, at any rate, would surely have the sense to leave her alone. She was sure she could trust Tamzine and Sonia not to tease.

'Everything will be new to us all. That will help,' she said to herself. 'I wonder how much Sonny knows about the school? I don't know very much, but she may know less, as she's been abroad all summer. I wish Tamzine could have met us, too, but it isn't on her way. Lucky for me that Sonny's staying at Rayley!'

The car turned into the drive of Rayley Park, where Rhoda's particular chum, Sonia Raymond, had been spending the last week of the holidays with her uncle and aunt, as her parents were in Paris. The house was not many miles from Wood End School; Rhoda was to lunch and spend the afternoon with Sonia, and they would go on together in the Rayley car after tea.

Rhoda brought the two-seater neatly up to the door just as Sonia came racing across the lawn.

'Oh, Rho! Gorgeous to see you again! Topping of you to come! We've such a pile of talk to clear up before we see the others!'

'Sonny! You've cut off your hair!' cried Rhoda, gazing fascinated at a mop of flaxen curls where she had expected a fat but short pigtail.

Sonny turned round to show the back of her head. 'Like it?'

'Rather! It suits you. But we shall all spell you S-U-N-N-Y now. You'll really have to be Sunny, with a halo like that.'

'Don't you dare!' Sonny threatened. 'Sentimental tripe! I say, Rho, what about your car?'

'Peters is taking her home. I've no luggage; everything's gone direct.'

'Tell him to go round to the garage and get some lunch; they'll look after him. We'll have ours out here.'

Rhoda turned eagerly, after a word with Peters and a farewell pat to the car. 'Out of doors? The whole family?'

'There isn't any family,' Sonia chuckled. 'Aunt Joan's taken the kiddies out for the day, to leave us a clear field, she said. Isn't she an angel?'

'How understanding of her!' Rhoda exclaimed. 'Just you and me? That's tophole. There are packs of children, aren't there?'

'Three, but one's just an infant. Janice is eight and John is five, and there's a new girl-baby. They've gone to spend the day with cousins, in Oxfordshire; twin girls. Aunt Joan says they're the image of Jansy, but I haven't seen them. Now, aren't we going to have a lovely lunch? Doesn't that cheer you up, Rho?'

The table was spread in a corner overlooking the small lake, and was very inviting. Rhoda dropped into a chair and gazed at the water.

'Nice! Couldn't we go over there?'

'I thought we'd take rugs and encamp among the bushes after lunch, and have our talk.'

'Very nice,' Rhoda agreed. 'Your Aunt Joan is rather a dear to arrange it for us.'

'She knows the school,' Sonia observed, taking the head of the table and waving her hand as a signal to the waiting maid. 'She hasn't seen the house itself, but she says the grounds are lovely and there's a gem of a tuck-shop.'

Rhoda raised her eyebrows and laughed. ‘A gem of a tuck-shop?’

‘Her very words. Just outside the school grounds. They serve teas and lunches, and Aunt Joan has been in on her way to that folk-dance class she teaches at a village institute. Jolly girls look after it, and it’s to be our tuck-shop.’

‘Sounds all right. I expect we’ll use it a good deal.’

‘Aunt Joan calls it the Squirrel House, or the Rose and Squirrel. The Rose part of it is a sort of handicraft shop next door. I’m crazy to see their craft work.’

‘Have you heard from Tamzine?’ Rhoda was only mildly interested in the school tuck-shop so far.

‘Not for weeks, the rotter! But she’s coming into this new stunt, so we’ll be together. I say, Rho, how much do you know about Wood End? I’m fearfully keen, but I don’t know very much about it. Do you?’

‘Only that Miss Cathcart has had the really brilliant idea that there are girls who aren’t going in for professions and don’t need to go to college and don’t want to pass exams, but who do need some special training for the sort of life they’re likely to have.’ Rhoda attacked the dainty lunch arranged by Mrs. Raymond. ‘You and I, for instance. Tammy too; her people have a big place in Cornwall. It will be useful for Tam to know all about gardening and fowls and keeping bees, and household management, and how to preside at the Women’s Institute and make speeches and run committees—to say nothing of riding and tennis.’

Sonia’s eyes widened. ‘Is that the programme? It doesn’t sound too bad. I hadn’t heard about the fowls and bees. I hope they’ll give us handicraft work too.’

‘We couldn’t work up all those country and outdoor stunts at Cliff End, in Brighton, so Miss Cathcart has bought this house at the foot of the Downs, with big grounds, and is turning it into a sort of training-school for seniors who aren’t keen on matric and Cambridge and leaving certificates. We’re to wear uniform—khaki breeches like those the land-girls had during the war, and smocks. I suppose you’ve heard about that?’

‘Oh, rather! My togs are in my trunk. It’s a sporting idea; I’ll love to be a land-girl.’

‘It’s more sensible than gym slips, for the sort of things we’re going to do. I’m going to beg for classes in first aid to animals; I’d like to be able to attend to the dogs and cats and horses, or at least to know what ought to be done for them,’ Rhoda said. ‘I lost a cat last year; I was very fond of him, and he died of starvation.’

‘Rhoda! At Kentisbury Castle?’

‘We didn’t know what was wrong with him, and everybody said he’d be all right and animals knew what was best for them. He just lay, for days, not eating or sleeping, and at last I insisted on having the vet. As the man was examining him he died; and the vet said it was exhaustion and we ought to have been feeding him for days. We called him in too late. I didn’t know you had to feed cats; I didn’t know how to do it. If he’d been a dog, one of our own men would have attended to him, but they all thought it wasn’t anything serious. I want to learn, so that the same sort of thing couldn’t happen again. I felt awful about it; he was my cat, and I’d let him die.’

Rhoda paused, her face sober. Presently she went on, with a change of subject. ‘There’s to be cookery too, so that we’ll understand how to run our houses for our future husbands.’

Sonia gave a jeer. ‘Future what? Are you going in for one?’

A shadow fell on Rhoda’s face. ‘I don’t know what I’m going in for. Everything’s crashed in the last few months. But it won’t hurt me to know a few of those things Miss Cathcart’s planning, and I mean to have a good time while I can.’

Sonia's face clouded also. 'Rho, I'm not being callous. I'm fearfully sorry about what's happened, and I want to say so. But I thought you'd rather not talk about it.'

Rhoda looked away from her, across the lake. 'Some day we'll discuss it, Son. Just now I feel there's nothing ahead. I'll make the most of each day as it comes, and do my best to have a good time; but I can't see what's going to happen when I leave school. It's all a blank. Geoff and I had such heaps of plans. To be alone with Mother isn't at all the same thing. I'll do what I can for her, of course; but it isn't much to look forward to.'

'How is she?'

'Only middling well. But the voyage to the Cape with Auntie will buck her up.'

'You didn't want to go with them?'

'I'd a thousand times rather go back to school.'

'I can understand that,' Sonia exclaimed, relieved that the tragedy had been mentioned and her sympathy expressed. 'We'll have a jolly good time at this new place, and you'll be bucked up. It all sounds marvellous! I'm looking forward to it no end. How many girls are coming from Brighton?'

'I haven't heard. It was such a relief to know that you and Tam would be there that I didn't bother about anybody else.'

'No one else matters, really,' Sonia agreed. 'If "R.S.T." are together, never mind the rest.'

Rhoda sat up. 'Oh, but you haven't heard! Rosalie's coming. We'll have to let her in.'

Sonia dropped her fork and stared at her guest. 'Rosalie? Who's she? Let her in? Into our gang? Into "R.S.T."?' Rho, you don't mean that; we couldn't! Who is she?'

'My cousin, Rosalie Kane. She's coming to Wood End. We won't be able to keep her outside. It's all right, Sonny; you'll like her.'

Sonia played with her fork and spoon. 'I may like her, but I don't want her butting into our affairs. Can't you be a little decent to her, without letting her into everything? You and I and Tamzine have been "R.S.T." ever since we went to school, for years and years. We can't break it up now.'

'It will have to be "2R.S.T." then,' Rhoda said. 'I can't leave Rosalie out.'

'Why is she coming to school with you now? She must be fairly senior if she's going to this new place. Why have you suddenly dug her up?' Sonia demanded.

Rhoda laughed. 'But I haven't. She's spent the holidays with us over and over again. She's younger than I am, not sixteen yet, but Miss Cathcart said she'd take her, to let her have a term or two with me. Rosalie and Geoffrey-Bill are quite at home at Kentisbury.'

'Another Geoffrey? Wasn't that rather awkward?'

Rhoda's face clouded again. 'He's Geoffrey Wilfred; we usually call him Bill. You know about our names; there's a Geoffrey or a Rose in every part of the family. It's a tradition we can keep, even if we can't in other ways.' It was a lifelong grief to Rhoda, and a real grudge against the world, that she had not been born a true Kane of Kentisbury. The family tradition was that its members should be fair, and tall, and handsome; Rhoda was handsome and tall, but there her share of the tradition ended. She could see no beauty in the dark hair that lay like a shadow on her shoulders in two thick plaits, or in the big dark eyes which Sonia, fair as sunshine, admired so much. Rhoda was like her mother; she never ceased to regret that she did not resemble her father, as Geoff, a real Kane, had done.

Sonia laughed. 'You can't change your hair, old girl. Not given up worrying over it yet? Is Rosalie a proper member of the family?'

‘She’s fair, and so is Geoffrey-Bill. They’ve had rotten luck. Sonia, you simply must be decent to Rosalie!’ Rhoda exclaimed. ‘I’ll tell you about her this afternoon. Grandfather left money to Bill and Rosalie; he was very fond of them, and he wanted them to be able to go in for anything they chose, in the way of jobs or professions. Bill is keen on the Navy, and his mother couldn’t possibly afford it; his father was a country rector, and they haven’t a penny more than they need. Grandfather liked Bill and Rosalie to come to the Castle to spend the holidays with Geoff and me, and we all grew up great chums. Their mother was independent and proud, and wouldn’t take anything to help; but when Grandfather died she couldn’t refuse what he left in his will. So Bill’s going into the Navy, and Rosalie’s going to do what she’s been dying to do for years—come to school with me, even if it’s only for a few terms.’

‘Jolly for her,’ Sonia admitted. ‘I’ll behave decently, of course. But I don’t want Rosalie butting in between you and me and Tammy. Why has she had rotten luck? Do you mean because her father wasn’t well off? Why wasn’t he, when the rest of the family’s rolling in wealth?’

‘We aren’t,’ Rhoda protested. ‘It takes a fortune to keep Kentisbury going, and we can’t get rid of it. Now, of course——’ and the shadow fell on her face again.

Sonia looked at her quickly. ‘Do you mean you’ll have to leave the Castle? Oh, I say, Rho, that’s hard lines! It’s always been your home! I suppose there’s a new Earl, in your brother’s place? Will he turn you and your mother out? Who is he?—Don’t tell me now,’ she added. ‘We’ll make ourselves comfy, out of sight of the house. I’ve a big box of chocs.’

She led Rhoda across the lawn and round the top of the little lake. Beyond the water was a rhododendron-covered bank, with winding paths among the bushes. Sonia found a tempting corner and spread rugs on the ground.

‘We’re out of sight here, if anybody should come to see Auntie, expecting to find her at home. We shan’t be interrupted. Now, Rho, tell me all your troubles! Who is the new head of the family? Will your mother really have to give up the Castle to him? Isn’t there room for all of you?’

Rhoda laughed in spite of herself. ‘Room for six families. But we may not care to stay. It’s—oh, it’s all horrible!’

She clasped her knees, shaking back her long, dark plaits, and stared down into the water-lily lake with a very sombre face.

CHAPTER 2.

TAMZINE COMES TO TEA

Sonia watched her anxiously. 'What's all horrible, Rho?'

'The new Earl is Uncle Geoffrey, who has always been an invalid,' Rhoda began. 'He's lived very quietly at Verriton, but he's coming to the Castle now. He's going to be married.' Her face grew hard. 'Sonny, it's a horrible story. He has never married, and we thought he never would. And so it was rather important who would come after him, if our Geoff didn't have a son. We never thought we should lose Geoff at sixteen, but we couldn't be sure he'd leave a family. After him there was Uncle Geoffrey, and then there were only distant cousins. The nearest one lived in Ceylon, but he was over sixty and he had no boys, so he hardly counted. After him'—she paused—'after him came Geoffrey-Bill, Rosalie's brother. That's why Grandfather liked to have him at Kentisbury; because if our Geoff didn't have a son, in time everything would go to Bill. It wasn't likely that Uncle Geoffrey, an invalid and over forty, or the old man in Ceylon, would live longer than Geoff, who was just a schoolboy. So we really looked on Bill as the next heir, until Geoff grew up and married.'

'I see that,' Sonia agreed. 'And your brother's death has brought Bill still nearer to the title. He comes after the new Earl and the other man.'

'We supposed he did. But last year we had a dreadful shock, and it upset everything for Bill and Rosalie. The man in Ceylon had only a daughter, who didn't count, any more than I do. Suddenly he married again—at that age!—and died soon afterwards; and the ghastly thing is that he left a boy, just an infant. So, you see, Bill——' and she paused.

'Bill's dished; out of it,' Sonia exclaimed. 'Oh, what hard lines! After expecting to be the heir! That's what you meant by Rosalie's having had hard luck! It would make a difference to her, too.'

'All the difference. If, by any chance, Geoff hadn't married, we'd all rather have had Bill to come after him than anybody else. Now this baby's come butting in.'

'Is he in India?'

'My dear, he's at Verriton, being brought up like a young Prince of Wales! Nurses all round him, and his wretched sister—oh, how I loathe that girl!'

'Why, what has she done to you?' Sonia asked in surprise. 'I thought, being a girl, she didn't count. Is she another Rose?'

'Of course. Rosemary, or Rosabel, or Rosamund, or Rosalind, or something; and a real Kane to look at, they say; I haven't seen her. Tall and fair, and all that she ought to be,' Rhoda groaned.

'You needn't be jealous because she happens to have fair hair,' Sonia remarked. 'Is she taking care of her baby stepbrother? Where's his mother?'

'Gone back to her friends in India. The girl's in charge of Roderick Geoffrey. They remembered their duty to the family when they chose his name!'

'But why do you loathe the poor girl? She sounds to me to be doing quite the proper thing.'

Rhoda pushed back her dark hair and glared at her friend. 'Very much so; too much! She's going to marry Uncle Geoffrey.'

Sonia sat up. ‘*What?* To marry the invalid Earl? So that she’ll be the Countess? Oh, what a mean trick!’

‘Beastly. But he’s better,’ Rhoda admitted, frowning. ‘She’s done something to him; made him see doctors and go to town for treatment. He’s walking about, and he hasn’t done that for years.’

‘Oh!’ Sonia gazed at her. ‘Then she’s doing him good. Perhaps he needed somebody to jog him up; somebody new, who wasn’t used to thinking of him as an invalid. You mustn’t hate her too much, if she’s working miracles like that, old thing.’

Rhoda pulled at the leaves of a rhododendron bush. ‘I hate the very thought of her; butting into the family like that! The baby couldn’t help being born and she couldn’t help being his sister; and if his mother wanted to live in India, I suppose it was all right for his sister to take charge of him. But she needn’t have made up her mind to marry Uncle Geoffrey.’

‘They aren’t married yet, then?’

‘They couldn’t, so soon after Geoff’s death. She had that much sense. I believe Uncle Geoffrey wanted her to do it at once, but she wouldn’t.’

‘I don’t see that you need hate her quite so fiercely,’ Sonia observed.

‘Don’t you see that she’s going to take Mother’s place?’ Rhoda flared. ‘So long as Uncle Geoffrey was unmarried, Mother was the obvious one to entertain for him at Kentisbury and to look after things, as she would have done for Geoff until he married. But as soon as Uncle marries there’s no place for Mother.’

‘The new Countess will be the head of the family, and the mistress of Kentisbury,’ Sonia agreed. ‘I see, Rho. You feel this girl is shoving your mother into the background. It’s rotten for you.’

‘Mother loves to boss and organize. It’s terribly hard on her,’ Rhoda exclaimed. ‘First she lost Father, and now Geoff’s gone; and she’s never had a chance. She might still have had it, if this girl hadn’t butted in. What does Uncle want to marry for, at his age?’

‘Seems to me it’s your uncle you should blame, not the girl,’ Sonia suggested. ‘She may be really fond of him, and she’s evidently very good for him. It’s not her fault that her marriage will upset your mother. If he asked her—and why shouldn’t he have a wife? He’s not really old. Aren’t you a bit hard on your cousin, Rho?’

Rhoda bit her lip. ‘There’s a car coming up the drive,’ she said, glad to change the subject. ‘What a good thing we’re in hiding!’

‘Rather!’ and Sonia crouched behind a bush. ‘They’ll go when they hear everybody’s out for the day.’

Screened by the bushes, they watched the car draw up at the front door of the long, low house. It stood there for a moment, then turned and drove away.

‘Jolly good!’ Sonia murmured. ‘I was afraid I might be wanted to take a message.’

‘Here comes the girl; there is a message,’ Rhoda remarked, as the maid came across the lawn. ‘She’s looking for you, Sonny. Better go and cope with the emergency.’

‘There’s somebody else at the door. Someone’s stayed behind,’ Sonia whispered. ‘Must be going to wait for Auntie. Oh, Rho, how utterly beastly! Spoiling our afternoon! I shall have to go and talk to the creature!’

‘The maid evidently expects you to help. What a bore!’ Rhoda said.

‘We could go off to school at once, instead of having tea first,’ Sonia rose reluctantly. ‘Say if you think we should, Rho.’

‘I’d rather, of course. Tea with a stranger won’t be any fun. But ought you to leave this person, Sonny? It doesn’t seem playing the game. Wouldn’t your aunt like you to be decent to her?’

‘I suppose so,’ Sonia groaned. ‘I’ll see what Mary says.’

She made her way among the bushes to the head of the lake. In a white summer frock and with her curly flaxen head, she was very plainly to be seen.

‘What on earth——!’ cried Rhoda, and sprang to her feet.

The visitor from the car came flying across the lawn, past the maid, to the lake. Sonia’s shout of welcome rang out at the same moment as Rhoda’s cry.

‘Tamzine! Tammy! Oh, cheers! How ever did you manage it?’ Sonia dashed through the bushes, and ran out on to the lawn.

Rhoda raced to join the other two. ‘Tamzine! What a shock! But how gorgeous! I thought you were going straight to school!’

‘Tisn’t much out of the way to come round here. We came by road and broke the journey at Winchester.’ Tamzine Trenow, the third of the trio, had brown shingled hair, and her sunburnt face told of eight weeks of Cornish boating and open-air life. ‘Oh, my dear people, I just had to see you at once! I couldn’t wait till you arrived, when I found I was going to be the first at school! I’ve something simply ghastly to tell you. I’ve come to break the news!’

‘Break it gently, then,’ said Rhoda. ‘You look all right, and you’re obviously coming back to school with us, so it can’t be anything very bad.’

‘Oh, but it is! I’m in the depths of despair.’

‘You don’t look it,’ Sonia retorted. ‘Tell us your sorrows! Rhoda’s been sobbing out her woes; now it seems to be your turn.’

‘I never did!’

‘What’s the row, Rho?’ Tamzine demanded.

‘I’ll tell you later, but only on condition you keep it to yourself. I don’t want the whole school talking about my family affairs, and you do chatter, Tammy. But I won’t keep secrets from “R.S.T.”’

‘“R.S.T.”! That’s the trouble,’ Tamzine wailed. ‘“R.S.T.”’s gone bust. And I was looking forward to this term, after being deserted by you both for almost the whole summer.’

‘What do you mean—gone bust?’ Rhoda and Sonia spoke together. ‘We’re going to school; you’re going to school. What’s wrong?’

‘I shall be there, but not, I fear, free to devote myself to our little amusements as I did formerly,’ Tamzine proclaimed. Then, with a sudden return to her normal manner, ‘Oh, my dears, isn’t it brutal? I’m to be nursemaid and foster-mother to a young cousin! I shall have to drag her round with me all the time. What’s the matter, you brutes? Don’t you see how agonizing it is?’

‘Oh, we see,’ Sonia agreed. ‘But you aren’t the only one; that’s why we laughed. Poor old Rho has a cousin too.’

‘We’ll harness our encumbrances and let them look after each other,’ Rhoda said. ‘Mine’s called Rosalie, and she’s arriving to-morrow.’

‘Really? Oh, marvellous!’ Tamzine chuckled. ‘If you’re in the same boat I don’t mind. We’ll pull through somehow. Mine lives in London and she’s called Daffodil.’

‘Tammy! You don’t mean it? Not really Daffodil?’ Rhoda and Sonia cried together.

‘Why not? It’s no worse than Rhoda, with her family bunch of roses; most muddling, I call it! Young Daffodil was born in April and her mother’s Welsh: a Welsh Daffodil. You can guess

what we call her for short.'

'Daff? Oh, do you mean Dafty?' Sonia asked, laughing.

'She's a very daft Daffodil! *My* name for her—and it suits her—is Till,' Tamzine said darkly.

'Till? Tilly, do you mean?'

'No, Till. Puck, you know; the German Puck, always up to something awful—"Till Owlglass."'

'Oh, Till's "Merry Pranks"?' He came into that musical lecture last winter,' Sonia exclaimed.

'That's the one. Young Daffy's a regular Till; you never know what she'll do next.'

'We seem to be in for a jolly term!' Sonia sighed. 'With you haunted by your Till, and Rhoda saddled with cousin Rosalie, and both of the Roses bowed down by a grudge against their unkind fate and nursing a furious feud against an unknown cousin, we look like being a really happy trio! Not at all like "R.S.T." used to be!'

'That's what I say,' said Tamzine. 'Our old trio has gone bust. Tell me about Rho's troubles!'

'We'll pull the trio together again,' Rhoda said. 'We won't let the cousins interfere. Sonny had better adopt a new girl; then she won't be able to crow over us.'

'Come and have tea, and we'll tell you about Rosalie,' Sonia suggested.

CHAPTER 3.

HELD UP BY DAFFODIL

'I agree with Rhoda. I should feel just as she does,' Tamzine said, when Rhoda's story had been told. 'This cousin has butted in and made the new Earl ask her to marry him, so that she'll be Countess of Kentisbury and not merely the elder sister of a baby heir. It's a much jollier position; she knows what she's about. I should hate her too.'

'Oh, well!' Rhoda began. 'It sounds rather awful, put like that, and it's how Mother and I have been feeling. But perhaps it isn't all her fault. If Uncle wanted it, you could hardly expect her to refuse him. But I could never forgive her for taking Mother's place.'

'She's an interloper, and, as Sonny says, it's a family feud,' said Tamzine. 'We'll stand by young Rosalie and console her.'

'You jolly well won't!' Rhoda protested. 'You're not to talk about it at school, Tam. Rosalie doesn't care; she says she'd have been bored stiff to be the sister of an Earl. She'd much rather he was just Bill the midshipman.'

'It will be far less trouble,' Sonia agreed. 'If you aren't born in a Castle, a place like Kentisbury must take some living up to.'

'That's what Rosalie says. But she'd have got used to it.'

'She isn't upset about it, then?' Sonia asked.

'Not a scrap. She just laughs and says Bill's had bad luck, and it's jolly for the baby, for he'll be brought up to the job.'

'Rosalie sounds jolly sensible!'

'Too sensible!' Tamzine retorted. 'Most disappointing! She ought to breathe undying hatred of the interloping family.'

'It's Mother and I who feel like that, for our own sake as well as for Rosalie's and Bill's.'

'You stood up for the girl when I said she was awful,' Tamzine grumbled.

'It sounded worse when you said it. I wondered suddenly if we were being unfair to her. But I do feel I'll never forgive her, and I don't want ever to see her.'

'I don't suppose you'll have to go to the wedding,' Tamzine remarked. 'Will you and Rosalie be bridesmaids?'

'Wild horses wouldn't drag us there! Don't talk about her, Tammy; she isn't a pleasant subject. Are you going to like Cathie's new stunt? This land-girl idea?'

'Oh, rather! I'm fearfully keen. I think they ought to have bridge classes and turn us out professional players. It's a necessary part of life nowadays.'

Rhoda and Sonia laughed. 'You won't get it, my dear. Don't set your heart on that!'

'When do we start?' Tamzine added. 'I want to see the new place.'

'We haven't a car until Aunt Joan comes back. She's gone in the big car, as she was taking all the kiddies. They'll be here soon; she'll want to put Baby to bed,' Sonia explained.

'Who's to be head of the new school?' Rhoda asked. 'Miss Cathcart won't stay there herself, with just a few of us. She'll want to be at Cliff End with the rest of the school. What's to be our fate?'

'Haven't heard,' Tamzine looked at Sonia.

'Well, I haven't! I've been in Paris all summer. If you don't know, nobody does. You were at Cliff End all last term. Rho was at home for the last six weeks.'

‘I heard heaps about the new place, but not who was to take charge. It’s fearfully important.’

‘It is,’ Sonia agreed. ‘We’ll have to wait—but it won’t be long now. Here’s the car.’

The big car swept up to the door and a crowd of red-haired children tumbled out. There were four of them, three girls of seven or eight years old, and a boy slightly younger, all very much alike in colouring, with bronze-red curls and brown eyes.

‘Jansy’s brought the twins back,’ said Sonia, as the elder girls walked across the lawn. ‘I’ve never seen them, but there’s no doubt about them, is there?’

There was no doubt about the twins, whose curls were bobbed, while Jansy’s hair was longer. They were hatless and excited, dancing on the gravel and demanding to be taken to see a very new kitten.

Mrs. Raymond gave her baby daughter to the nurse and came to meet the girls; and the children disappeared in the direction of the shed where the kitten lived.

‘Isn’t she like the kiddies?’ Tamzine murmured. ‘She might be the mother of the whole crowd! Just the same lovely red hair and brown eyes!’

‘They’ve gone to see Tommy Tucker,’ Mrs. Raymond explained to Sonia. ‘He was the bribe that brought the twins here. Their mother wanted to go to town for a concert, so we brought them back with us; but they came to see Tommy Tucker, not to please me! This is Rhoda, I suppose? Have you had a good chat? You brought a friend? That was very nice of you.’

Tamzine, flushing, spoke up quickly. ‘Rhoda didn’t bring me; I just came. I apologize, Mrs. Raymond; it was fearful cheek. But I was passing quite near on my way to school, and I was dying to see these two. We’ve always been chums, and I wanted to talk to them before we met the others. I hadn’t seen Rhoda since June, and Sonny not since April.’

‘Quite right,’ said Joan Raymond. ‘I’m glad we were out and you had a clear field. But I expect now you’re in a hurry to get on to school.’ Her eyes rested on Rhoda with sympathy and interest, for everybody knew the story of her brother’s tragic accident.

In a very few minutes the car was laden with Sonia’s luggage and the three girls had said good-bye and were on their way, Tamzine on the front seat. She turned to hang over the back, to talk to the other two.

‘Sonny, what a jolly young aunt! You’re in luck. If you don’t like school, you can run away and ask her to protect you. She’d do it; she’s sporting.’

‘Oh, but I’m going to like it,’ Sonia said, laughing. ‘Why shouldn’t I, with both of you to keep me from being lonely?’

‘And Rhoda’s Rosalie, and my Till,’ Tamzine said darkly. ‘We don’t know yet how much difference they’re going to make.’

‘We won’t let them make any difference. But I do feel Aunt Joan would be the one to turn to, while Mother is abroad, if I found myself in any mess. I know she’d help.’

‘Sure she would! I felt like telling her I should adopt her too, while Mother’s away,’ Rhoda said.

‘As for the cousins making no difference,’ Tamzine groaned, ‘it doesn’t seem to have occurred to you two innocents that we may be expected to sleep with them. We’ve always roomed together, till now. What if Cathie dumps Till Owlglass in the bed next to me and sends Sonny somewhere else?’

‘Tam, you horror!’ Sonia cried. ‘Let’s hope she won’t!’

‘I don’t want your Daffodil,’ Rhoda said. ‘But I wouldn’t mind having Rosalie. Don’t worry till we know more about the house, Tam. It may have big dormies for a dozen, or single rooms. Either way would solve the problem.’

‘True, O wise Lady Rhoda,’ Tamzine mocked. ‘By the way, is Rosalie a ladyship too? We might as well know.’

‘No, of course not. I told you she was only a second cousin.’

‘I didn’t know how far out into the family you were saddled with titles, honourables and ladies and so on.’

‘It doesn’t go as far as Bill and Rosalie,’ Rhoda said shortly.

They were drawing near to the hills, a blue range with a smooth, sweeping line against the sky. The lower slopes were clothed with woods, of elm and beech and chestnut; but before reaching these the car passed through a belt of sandy soil, and here were low hills clad in pine trees, and open spaces of common land, covered with rocks and heather, and gorse and young silver birches.

‘It will be gorgeous in a month, when the leaves begin to turn,’ said Sonia. ‘The school’s in among those woods, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, just under the hills, I was told,’ Rhoda agreed.

‘Jolly place. Better than the old barracks at Brighton. I wonder the whole of Cliff End didn’t want to come,’ said Sonia.

‘Oh, but you can’t take exams here! The girls are nearly all keen on college, and they have to prepare for their entrance exams. They call us the Duds or the Slackers or the Limps,’ Tamzine remarked.

‘Limps! That’s rather good. I like being a Limp,’ Rhoda said, laughing. ‘I’ve no wish to spend years at Cambridge. I’d rather like to be a qualified vet; I’m keen on animals. But I don’t want to give years to it, so I’ll have to be content with a smattering.’

‘I say!’ cried Sonia. ‘Oh—look!’ and she pointed.

On a five-barred gate beside the road, leaning dangerously forward to scan each car as it passed, was a girl of fifteen, dressed in khaki breeches and smock and a soft hat to match. As Sonia spoke, she leapt from the gate and dashed towards the passing car.

‘Stop! Hi, stop! Murder—fire—help! Hi, I say!’

‘Oh, please stop!’ Sonia exclaimed to the chauffeur. ‘She wants us to pick her up.’

‘Please don’t stop!’ Tamzine groaned. ‘Do her good to have to run after us. Serve her right!’

‘Is it your Daffodil?’ Rhoda asked, laughing, as the car slowed down.

‘Looks like her, though I haven’t seen her in that rig-out before. I can’t imagine how she’s managed it. She wasn’t coming till to-morrow.’ Tamzine’s voice was full of disgust.

‘Take me on board!’ Daffodil struggled, panting, with the handle. ‘I knew Tam would be in the front seat. I thought I’d be able to stop you! I say, isn’t it fun? I’m an old girl! I’ve been at Wood End for hours, while you’ve been gossiping! Are these the rest of the trio? Tell me which is which, Tam! Oh, the dark one is Lady Rhoda! Rosalie told me about her. Then the fair one must be Sonny. I know all about you both.’

She pulled down the small seat and sat with her back to the driver, surveying the three critically. ‘I’ve heard heaps about you from Tammy. You’re all older than me, aren’t you?’

She had brown, laughing eyes and bobbed brown curls, but she had not Tamzine’s sunburn. ‘I held you up properly, like a real highwayman. I’m supposed to be exploring the grounds with the others, so you must drop me somewhere out of sight of the house.’

‘We won’t,’ Tamzine vowed. ‘We’ll take you right up to the front door.’

‘Oh, no, you won’t! I shall leap screaming from the car and lie helpless in the road with a broken leg, and another car will run over me, and you’ll be held responsible at the inquest. You’ll stop for me, won’t you? You look a good sort,’ and Daffodil turned to Sonia.

‘How did you get here, Dafty?’ Tamzine asked sternly. ‘You weren’t to arrive till to-morrow morning.’

‘I came this morning instead, to give you a pleasant surprise.’

‘You would. It’s most unpleasant. I wanted time to get used to things before you turned up.’

‘I know you did. So did I; I wanted to get settled first, so that you’d be the new girl. That’s why I made Daddy say I could come to-day; it was arranged for to-morrow, but we had a notice saying that a school party would come to-day, leaving town at eleven; and I told Daddy how much better it would be for them to get rid of me at once.’ Daffodil’s brown eyes danced triumphantly.

Tamzine grunted. ‘Well, of course, I’m delighted to see you, Daff. But I’d rather have had you to-morrow.’

‘I know you would,’ her cousin laughed.

‘What is the school like?’ Sonia asked. ‘None of us has seen it.’

‘Oh, a topping place! I love the uniform, don’t you?’ Daffodil slapped her knee joyfully.

‘You look all right,’ Rhoda admitted, keeping back the ‘very nice indeed.’ which she felt would have been more truthful. ‘Is it comfy?’

‘Gorgeous! The girls all love it.’

‘Are we to wear it all the time?’ Sonia began.

But her question was cut short by an exclamation from Rhoda. ‘Didn’t you say something about Rosalie? Is she here? You said Rosalie had told you about me.’

‘She came in the train with us. And two other new girls, awfully jolly people, called Robin Brent and Gwyneth Somebody. We all talked all the way; Robin was shy, but she soon got used to us. Gwyneth is her adopted sister or something; they’re awfully pally.’

The trio looked at one another. ‘It’s odd to be told things by a new kid,’ Rhoda voiced the feeling of all. ‘She’s made the most of her time, hasn’t she?’

‘It isn’t the thing at all. She isn’t a proper new girl,’ Sonia grumbled. ‘She’s got in ahead of us.’

‘She isn’t a proper anything,’ Tamzine said. ‘I told you she was Puck—Till Owlglass.’

Daffodil made a face at her. ‘You can’t boss me when you don’t know your way about and I do. It’s a new school, and you’re newer than I am.’

‘If you know so much, make yourself useful and tell us what we’re panting to know, Till!’ Tamzine commanded. ‘Who’s the head here? Not Miss Cathcart herself, I suppose?’

‘No, she’s in Brighton. I haven’t seen her yet. She’s coming to look at us when everybody’s arrived.’

‘Then who?’ the trio spoke together.

‘Her name’s Miss Rainey. I’ve only just seen her. Is she nice?’

‘Rain! “Rain, rain, go away!” Oh, we like old Rainey! That’s all right!’ Tamzine exclaimed.

‘Might be a good deal worse,’ Rhoda said.

‘Yes, I’ve no objection to Rain,’ Sonia agreed. ‘The Daffodil has relieved our minds.’

Tamzine leaned over the back of her seat. ‘Till! Have you seen the tuck-shop?’

Daffodil's brown eyes widened. 'Yes, it's the dinkiest place. I haven't been inside; it's only to be open to us at certain hours. Who told you about it?'

'Sonny's Aunt Joan knows the girls who run it. She told Son it was a gem of a tuck-shop.'

'So it is. There are two—oh, you can see it! Look out quickly; this side!'

The elder girls looked eagerly where she pointed. The car had left the road and turned up a lane, running straight to the Downs. A long white cottage with thatched roof stood inside a low wall, with a garden and a paved courtyard, where basket tables and chairs stood under green and golden umbrellas. The cottage had two doors; over one hung a sign of two brown squirrels, over the other swung a big red rose. A girl in a lilac overall, with wavy, fair hair, was waiting on some customers who were having a late tea.

'That isn't our part of it,' Daffodil spoke quickly, as the car swept past. 'Those are the Rose and Squirrel cottages; the Squirrel gives teas, and the Rose sells all sorts of handwork and lovely things; jolly for buying presents, I should think. Our tuck-shop is behind, another cottage, looking into the school grounds. We saw it this afternoon, and then I saw these two as I came to meet you. Rosalie and I think—oh, help! There she is!—and I'm out of bounds! Let me bury myself among your legs, Lady Rhoda and Sonny!' and she dived to the floor of the car.

'What's the matter with her?' Sonia cried.

'What on earth's up?' Rhoda, very naturally, looked for some sign of her cousin. 'She said "Rosalie—there she is!" Where is she?'

'Idiot!' hissed Daffodil. 'Look up the road!'

'Oh, I see! Miss Rainey, coming out of the tuck-shop,' Sonia remarked. 'Well, I don't blame Dafty!'

Their new headmistress stood at a gate a little farther up the road. She signalled to the driver to stop the car, and came to greet the girls.

Tamzine leaned over the back of her seat. 'Get up, Till,' she said, in a terrible voice. 'Rain will see you in two secs; it's hopeless to crawl about down there. In any case, you aren't going to behave like a kid of ten here. If you break bounds, or do anything mad, you've got to stand up to the results. Be an ass, if you like; but don't hide like an infant afterwards. You're not at a baby school any longer.'

Then she turned to greet Miss Rainey.

Daffodil, with a very red face and very tumbled curls, struggled up from her lair to meet the head's astonished eyes.

CHAPTER 4. A BAD START

‘Well, Rhoda, how are you, my dear?’ Miss Rainey came forward to the car. ‘Sonia, we’re glad to see you back, after this long holiday. Tamzine, too! Where did you—*Daffodil!*’

‘Yes, Miss Rainey,’ Daffodil’s eyes were downcast. ‘I went out a little way, to meet Tamzine. I stopped the car and made them take me in.’

Miss Rainey looked at her, a keenly thoughtful look, for Daffodil was as yet unknown to her. This was a bad beginning, a fact which Tamzine determined to rub in at the earliest possible moment.

‘I see it will be necessary to keep an eye on you,’ the head said coldly. ‘Tamzine, I hope you will explain to your cousin that we have no room here for children, and that we expect reasonable behaviour from a girl of her age. Daffodil, it is time you were changing for dinner; I told you uniform would not be allowed after half-past six. You will have to hurry; your hair is in a disgraceful state. I am not sure that I can allow you to sleep in the Robin room, as you are so anxious to do. If this is the sort of behaviour I have to look for, it may be necessary to put you with your cousin. You must——’

‘Oh, please, Miss Rainey!’ Daffodil pleaded. ‘I won’t go on being mad. I wanted to see Tam before she arrived. I’m sorry I went out of bounds.’

‘You must consider yourself on probation among the Robins,’ Miss Rainey said. ‘If I have any more trouble with you I shall certainly move you. I will see you later, girls; dinner is at seven-thirty and you will want to unpack and change.’

She stood back and the car drove on.

Daffodil dropped into her seat again. ‘Old pig! Why is she strolling about here at this time?’

‘Having a cocktail—or a glass of milk—at the tuck-shop. An ice, perhaps,’ Sonia suggested. ‘You were properly caught, Daffy. You’d better be less mad in future.’

Tamzine leaned over the seat again. ‘Till!’ she exploded. ‘What did Miss Rainey mean? Where are you to sleep? Not with me, I understand? I’ll jolly well see that you behave, if you’re going to be dumped on me next time she catches you out.’

‘You’re not to call me that silly name!’ Daffodil flared.

‘I shall call you Till as long as you behave in a Tillish way. Now tell us what Miss Rainey meant.’

‘The rooms are called after the patterns on the curtains,’ Daffodil spoke to Rhoda and Sonia, turning her back on Tamzine. ‘Miss Rainey put Robin Brent and Gwyneth in the Robin room, but she said she hadn’t decided whether to put Rosalie and me with them, or to put Sonia in there, and make us sleep in the Kingfisher room, with Rhoda and Tamzine, because we’re cousins. We just shrieked at her that we didn’t want to sleep with you people and be treated as new kids, and that we’d rather all be new together in the Robin room. She laughed; I thought she was rather a jolly old thing! And she said we could try it. So all my possessions are in the Robin room, and I’ve no intention of changing.’

‘I’m quite determined that you shan’t change, if changing means coming into my room and turning Sonny out,’ Tamzine retorted.

‘Then are we three to be together?’ Sonia exclaimed. ‘That’s jolly decent of Miss Rainey. She knows we’ve always been together.’

‘In the Kingfisher room,’ said Daffodil. ‘But perhaps you’ll have somebody else. There are four beds in each room.’

The trio looked at one another. ‘I wouldn’t mind having Rosalie,’ Rhoda said. ‘But it would be horrid to have a stranger.’

‘Horrider still for the stranger,’ Sonia remarked.

‘We’ve bagged Rosalie for the Robins,’ Daffodil cried.

‘Well, Till Owlglass, we don’t want you,’ said Tamzine. ‘You’ll please remember, and be careful in future. It was decent of Rain not to send you at once. She’s realized what sort of infant you are; I saw it in her face. She’ll keep an eye on you now. You are an ass, to make a bad start like this!’

‘I don’t want to come in with you,’ Daffodil said defiantly. ‘If anything would make me into a perfect angel and a model little girl, it would be the thought of sleeping with you three. I like you well enough, but I’d be bossed till I couldn’t stand up or sit down without saying: “Please, Rhoda!” “Please, Sonia!” “Thank you, Tamzine!” No, thanks! Next door is too near for me!’

As the car drew up, she sprang out and raced away.

The elder girls looked at one another. Sonia chuckled and Rhoda laughed. ‘What a kid! Oh, hard lines, Tam! You’ll be expected to look after her!’

‘We’ll help. Don’t look so blue, Tammy! She’s learning a wholesome respect for her elders already,’ Sonia comforted her friend. ‘She doesn’t want to see too much of us. The dreadful thought may tone her down. Come and see our Kingfisher curtains! Deep blue, I hope. I suppose the Robins have red ones.’

The curtains, as the girls stood at the door of their room and looked round in warm approval, hung between and in front of each cubicle and at the windows, and were of creamy cretonne, with a design of large blue kingfishers scattered over them. A glimpse into another room showed green parrots flaunting on a white ground, while another had big storks flying across pale blue, and yet another had little yellow canaries dotted about on a brown background.

‘Haven’t we gone all gay?’ Sonia laughed.

‘Jolly pretty, I call it!’ Tamzine gave her approval to the colour schemes. ‘Let’s get some more of the cretonne and run up kimonos to match!’

‘But where is everybody?’ Rhoda turned to the matron, who had met them at the door, and, hearing they had seen the headmistress, had brought them straight upstairs.

But Matron was hurrying away to her duties, with a reminder that dinner would be at half-past seven, and orders to unpack at once.

The girls took possession of their blue room. ‘We’ll see the crowd later. There are some of them on the lawn. What a jolly garden!’

‘You choose first, Rho,’ said Sonia. ‘Which corner will you have?’

‘Nice of you! This one, by the west window, thanks,’ and Rhoda threw her hat on the blue coverlet of her bed.

‘There’s Helen—and Letty—and Annis—and Susan,’ Tamzine called, gazing down at the lawn. ‘They’d all come together, of course; they’re a gang, like “R.S.T.” I wonder if they’re storks or parrots?’

‘I wonder if your dear little cousin is safely in her room, Tam?’ Sonia hinted.

‘I’m going to look for *my* dear little cousin,’ said Rhoda. ‘Daffodil said she was in there too.’

‘We’ll all come. We want to see Rosalie.’ Sonia and Tamzine tossed their coats and hats aside.

‘You’d better warn her against Till Owlglass,’ Tamzine suggested. ‘The poor kid won’t know what to expect.’

Rhoda laughed. ‘Rosalie can take care of herself.’

The door of the next room stood ajar. ‘They’re expecting us. Till’s arrived,’ said Tamzine, and knocked impressively before she pushed open the door.

The curtains of the big cubicles were drawn back, their brown-and-red robins pushed against the wall and the dividing posts. Two girls sat on their beds shrouded in thick manes of brown hair, brushing and chatting with equal vigour. Only the khaki breeches appearing under the tumbled locks told which was Daffodil; the other girl, whose hair was long, wore a white silk underskirt, and her evening frock of brown velvet hung ready on the foot of her bed. Another girl, also much undressed, sat changing her stockings, her black hair hanging about her face and shoulders in a riot of curls.

The fourth, a younger girl with bobbed curly yellow hair, was the same age as Daffodil. She was kneeling before a bottom drawer, but she looked up in response to the knock and laughed a greeting to Rhoda. ‘Hello, Rho! Isn’t it tophole to be here?’

‘Daffodil we know, alas! Rosalie we can guess,’ Tamzine proclaimed from the doorway. ‘But who are the strangers? The black, curly stranger and the brown, hairy stranger?’

The girl who was not Daffodil flung back her hair and laughed. ‘It sounds like old times, Gwyn; the black curly-headed maiden! I’m Robertina Brent, but luckily they call me Robin,’ she said to the girls in the doorway. ‘Gwyn is Gwyneth Morgan, and we adopted one another as sisters five years ago, when we were twelve. She hadn’t any family; I had everything I needed except a sister—father, mother, two brothers. So she came into the family to round it off neatly.’

‘Jolly for you both. Then you’re as old as we are,’ said Sonia. ‘Daffodil and Rosalie are our only juniors. How old are you, Rosalie? We’ve heard about you from Rhoda.’

‘Two years younger than I am,’ said Rhoda; the cousins had been having a hasty word. ‘Not sixteen yet.’

‘Rosalie and I are mere babes,’ Daffodil peered at them through her hair. ‘The babies of the school; everybody’s pets and playthings. You’ll have to be very kind to us or we shall cry.’

‘Sweet shy babes!’ Tamzine mocked. ‘Will the rest of you poor Robins really put up with them?’

‘Did you come to warn us?’ Gwyneth asked. ‘We’ve guessed what we’re up against. We’re going to keep them in the nest till they get too awful, and then we shall throw them out.’

‘Hand them in next door, to their cousins,’ Robin suggested.

‘In the meantime,’ Gwyneth went on, ‘you Kingfishers had better go back to your pond, or you won’t be changed in time for dinner.’

‘True, O curly-headed black maid! But why our pond?’ Tamzine paused in the doorway.

‘Kingfishers always live in ponds or streams.’

‘So they do!’ Tamzine admitted. ‘We’ll be the pond-dwellers. Is yours a nest?’

‘Robins’ Nest,’ said Gwyneth. ‘The canaries, along the corridor, live in the cage.’

Tamzine nodded, gazing at her fascinated. ‘And the parrots?’

‘The perch, of course.’

‘Good! What an imagination!’

‘What about the storks?’ Rhoda asked.

‘I know!’ Sonia cried. ‘The cradle!’

‘Of course,’ Gwyneth agreed. ‘Storks and cradles go together. At the end of the corridor there’s the rookery; that’s all so far.’

‘We haven’t seen the rookery. Who are the rooks?’

‘I don’t think anybody’s sleeping there yet. But there’s no doubt about the rooks; big black ones, on yellow curtains.’

‘Most effective curtains,’ Robin said. ‘We had a look all along this corridor and the other one, and Gwyn produced those names. If you don’t mind, we’d like to go on dressing.’

The visitors laughed and apologized. ‘We’ll withdraw to our pond,’ said Sonia. ‘A bright jolly set in there!’ she added, as she closed the door.

‘I shouldn’t wonder if Robin and Gwyneth were quite decent additions to our crowd,’ Rhoda said. ‘Rosalie seems keen on them; they all met at the station and came from town together, with a new mistress called Miss Durrant, who is to see to the gardening side of things.’

‘I hoped old Rain wasn’t going to take the gardening herself,’ Tamzine remarked. ‘It would be—oh, here they come at last!’

‘We shall never get changed at this rate!’ Rhoda said, laughing. ‘And as for unpacking——!’

A hubbub had filled the lower hall, as the rest of the girls came trooping in from the garden. They surged up the wide staircase, and with shouts of welcome fell upon the three who waited for them at the door of the Kingfisher room.

‘Rhoda! Oh, you’ve come! Ripping to have you back, old girl!’ cried Susan.

‘Sonny Raymond’s arrived! Come on, you others! Here’s old Sonny! Tamzine, too!’ Helen exclaimed.

‘Cheers, Tam! We expected you hours ago!’

‘Had a jolly summer, Son? How’s Paris?’ Letty asked.

In the Robin room the new girls looked at one another. ‘Doesn’t it make you feel awfully new?’ Robin Brent said pensively. ‘They’re all friends, and we’re outsiders. Thank goodness, there are four of us!’

‘They sound a jolly lot,’ said Gwyneth, beginning to comb her black curls.

‘What did you mean, Robin, when you said it sounded like old times, when they called Gwyneth a black curly person?’ Rosalie asked. ‘It’s exactly what she is.’

Robin laughed. ‘When she was quite a kiddy, she was painted in a picture out of a Welsh fairy-tale, as the Black Curly-Headed Maiden, riding on a yellow mule.’

‘But I’ve seen that picture!’ Rosalie sat on the floor by her open drawer and stared at Gwyneth. ‘And it is like you—when you were little, of course. You were wearing a green riding-dress. It’s in the Quellyn gallery, in London.’

‘Well, don’t talk about it,’ Gwyneth exploded. ‘I don’t want the rest teasing me. Robin, why did you say it? There wasn’t any need.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Robin exclaimed. ‘Gwyn, I’m really awfully sorry. I spoke without thinking. You two will forget about it, won’t you? Gwyn doesn’t want to be teased.’

‘I don’t see why she should mind,’ Rosalie said. ‘But we won’t say anything. Even if the others have seen the picture in town, they’ll never think of it in connection with her unless the

idea's put into their heads.'

'I know. It was my fault,' Robin said penitently. 'Daffodil, you won't say anything, will you?'

'Not so long as she behaves herself.' Daffodil began to brush her brown hair again.

Robin looked troubled. 'Do you mean——?'

'If you give away something that we want kept dark, you'll find the nest too hot to hold you, my child. So you'd better be careful what you're about,' Gwyneth remarked.

Daffodil gave her an impish grin. 'All right, old Welshy!'

CHAPTER 5.

THE GARDENING MISTRESS

Kingfisher blue; robin red; canary yellow; parrot green; stork white—these were the colours of the big bedrooms; and each, except the blue, held four girls. The rookery, at the end of one corridor, had no occupants so far, the girls believed. But while the dozen who had come in from the garden were still greeting Rhoda and Sonia and Tamzine, a step came on the stair, and a voice of authority made them jump.

‘Now, girls, what’s all this? Why aren’t you in your rooms?’

The new gardening mistress, coming from a survey of the grounds, was dressed in the same uniform that Daffodil had been wearing; khaki breeches, smocked yellow tunic to match, long boots, and soft khaki hat, with a glimpse of red hair beneath. She looked inquiringly at the group, which was melting into the nearest bedrooms.

Helen, a former Brighton senior, explained. ‘We’ve just discovered these three, Miss Durrant. They were at school with us before, but Sonny—this is Sonia Raymond—has been in Paris all summer, and Rhoda missed the last half of last term. She’s Rosalie’s cousin, you know. And this is Tamzine, who is Daffodil’s cousin. We were so glad to see them that I’m afraid we were telling them so rather noisily.’

‘You’ll have plenty of time to tell them; but you’ll be very late for dinner, if you don’t hurry. No more talking out here,’ and Miss Durrant went down the corridor and into the black and gold room.

The girls looked at one another and then slipped away to their rooms, and a wild scurry of changing began.

‘She’ll have to hustle too,’ Tamzine remarked. ‘She knew she hadn’t a moment to spare. Is she going to have the rookery all to herself?’

‘I wouldn’t like to share it with her,’ said Sonia, diving into her suit-case for slippers. ‘I believe her hair’s bright red, and that usually means a temper.’

‘She looks very nice in working clothes.’ Rhoda was lifting out her velvet frock. ‘Did you see the engagement ring? Rubies; a very pretty ring.’

‘Didn’t have time. I’ll look for it at dinner,’ and Tamzine hurled her possessions in all directions.

She dressed quickly, and was ready with a moment or two to spare, so she tapped on the door of the Robin room. ‘Here, young Daffodil! Come and answer questions!’

Daffodil appeared, looking very neat. For evening wear at Cliff End, in Brighton, the authorities had decreed velvet frocks cut to one pattern but varying in colour, and the same custom was to be continued in the new school. Daffodil’s frock was brown to match her eyes, and so was Robin Brent’s. Rosalie Kane was wearing deep blue; Gwyneth’s dark green increased her likeness to the Black Curly-Headed Maiden of the Quellyn picture, as Robin had realized at a glance.

Sonia, in pale blue, and Tamzine, in light green, were ready and waiting to question Daffodil. ‘This new person—Miss Durrant; is she jolly? You said she came in the train with you. She’s sleeping in the rookery, my child, so mind what you’re about. It’s at the end of our corridor.’

‘My hat!’ said Daffodil. ‘And talking of hats, had she her hat on when you saw her?’

‘Yes, of course. She’d been in the garden. Why?’

‘You’ll soon see. Oh, she’s all right! She knows this place; she’s worked here before. Said so in the train.’

‘But it hasn’t been a school before!’

‘Can’t help that; she said it. She knows the tuck-shop people, too. There’s the gong! Oh, Rhoda, what a lovely colour!’

Rhoda’s frock was violet, since black had been considered unsuitable for school; her dark hair, in its two thick plaits, framed her face.

Daffodil eyed her critically. ‘You aren’t a bit like Rosalie, are you? But awfully pretty in your own way,’ she said, as she turned to go. ‘I should think you’ll have to put up all that hair when you’re gardening, or you’ll be digging it into the flower-beds.’

Rhoda had flushed at the comparison with Rosalie, which was such a sore point. She laughed at the last remark, however. ‘I’ll try not to do that. Oh, I *say*! Is that what you meant?’—as Miss Durrant came out of her room. ‘Oh, how different she looks! Tam—Sonny! Come and have a shock!’

The gardening mistress saw her face and understood its expression, though she did not hear the words. She laughed as she passed the doorway. ‘Hurry, girls!’

Her hair, freed from its hat, was a flaming mass of curls, making a red halo round her head. As she went downstairs, Daffodil hung over the banisters.

‘I say, Miss Durrant! May we come and peep at you in that gold and black room? You must look topping! But ought you to wear a ruby ring?’

Miss Durrant looked up at her. ‘Yes, for it was given to me by somebody very nice.’

‘Oh, please, won’t you tell us? Who is he?’

But Miss Durrant shook her head and went into the dining room.

‘Come on, my children!’ and Daffodil dived after her down the stair.

‘The four Robins are the only new girls,’ Sonia said with satisfaction, as she seated herself with Rhoda and Tamzine.

‘I like the small tables,’ Rhoda said. ‘We three still haven’t a fourth.’

‘My idea about our vacant seat and bed is that it’s being reserved for Till Owlglass, in case she breaks out too badly,’ Tamzine remarked. ‘If there’s an empty place in our room and at our table, it can always be held over her as a threat. I don’t think we shall have any fourth given to us.’

‘So much the better. We’ll keep Till in order, and then we’ll have our room to ourselves.’

‘Easier—I mean, more easily; sorry!—said than done, Sonny mine,’ Tamzine groaned.

‘Oh, but Till doesn’t want to leave the Robins’ nest for any old pond,’ said Rhoda, glancing across the dining-room at the table where Robin and Gwyneth sat with the cousins of the Kingfishers. ‘I like those two,’ she added. ‘Gwyneth has a lot in her, I believe, and Robin seems a nice, friendly, calm sort of person.’

‘If she’s that, she’ll be good for my Till,’ said Tamzine.

The five little tables, each for four girls, were grouped about the dining room, which had big windows looking on the lawn. The tables were of yellow pine, beautifully grained and polished, with straw mats to protect the surface from hot dishes; the walls of the room were yellow, and there were sprays of autumn leaves and early brown chrysanthemums on each table. It was a cheerful room, by daylight or at night.

Miss Rainey sat at a slightly larger table, with Miss Durrant’s blazing red head on one side, and on the other Miss Trevor, who had come from Cliff End, in Brighton.

‘Small staff!’ Sonia murmured.

‘There are only nineteen of us,’ Rhoda reminded her. ‘And all much the same age and doing the same work. We don’t need forms and divisions.’

‘What about music? And dancing? Singing? Are we going to drop all those for a year or two?’

‘Not likely. Visiting people, I expect,’ Tamzine suggested. ‘I’m not going to give up my music for anybody.’

Her idea was confirmed in a short speech from Miss Rainey at the end of the meal.

‘We shall start work to-morrow,’ she said. ‘You will turn out in our new uniform—suppose we call it working kit—for breakfast. For the present we do not intend to divide you into classes, but that may come later, as our numbers grow and your powers develop. It isn’t likely that you will all work at the same rate in the same subjects; some will forge ahead and others will need to go more slowly. But Miss Trevor and I feel that some division is necessary; you want individual attention, and Miss Durrant is not prepared to oversee nineteen girls scattered about a large garden.’

Miss Durrant looked at her and then at the girls and laughed, and the school laughed back in response.

‘So you will work in groups, and for the moment we shall base the groups on your present arrangement at table and in your bedrooms. We have deliberately put sets of friends together, believing you will work better so; you are not children, who would get into mischief and need to be separated. The Stork, Canary, and Parrot groups will work together for this term; next year, if we have a few more girls, we will make them into groups of eight. You are all old Brighton girls and know the ways and traditions of the school. The Kingfisher and Robin rooms will be in one group, as the Robins are all new girls and Rosalie Kane and Daffodil Trenow will like to be with their cousins. Miss Trevor will take you for languages; French and German are as important for you as for the exam girls in Brighton. Don’t think you are going to escape your French!’

One or two expressive faces reddened and eyes were lowered hurriedly. It was Miss Trevor’s turn to smile.

‘Miss Durrant will begin your gardening work. The bees and chickens we have promised you are coming, but not, probably, till next term. Our permanent gardening mistress is taking a few months’ intensive training in these subjects and will come to us after Christmas, when Miss Durrant has other plans and will have to leave us.’ She caught Miss Durrant’s eye and smiled, and the girls with one accord looked at the ruby ring.

‘Rain means she’s going to be married at Christmas,’ Rhoda murmured.

‘Hope he hasn’t red hair too, or there won’t be much peace in the happy home,’ Tamzine rejoined.

‘You don’t know she has a temper.’

‘I’m positive certain of it. But we may not see it. Yes, that’s what I expected!’

Miss Rainey, with her eye on the Kingfisher group, was explaining that the music master from Brighton would visit the school every Friday afternoon to take the singing class and the piano girls; the violinists, of whom Tamzine was one, would have their weekly lesson on Friday evenings, when the dancing class would also be held. ‘It is an easy motor run from Brighton; there need be no break in your work of last term,’ she said. ‘Miss Cathcart will come frequently to look us up. I am arranging for a course of first-aid lectures, and I hope this

will include elementary treatment for animals in case of illness or accident, by special request.'

Rhoda, who had put her idea forward shyly, in a few moments' talk with Miss Rainey before dinner, reddened, but smiled her thanks, and several girls looked interested.

'I myself will give you lectures in literature and on certain subjects which, I believe, you will find useful in the future. We shall form ourselves into committees and take turns in being chairman and secretary, and we will practise keeping minutes and addressing our committee on various subjects, and will carry out debates. Now that is a good programme to begin upon; our plans will develop further as we go along. You may bring me suggestions and any special desires, and I will consider them in consultation with Miss Cathcart.'

She was turning to go from the room, amid a round of applause from the girls, when Miss Durrant murmured a suggestion.

'Ah, yes!' and Miss Rainey held up her hand for silence. 'Girls, in one corner of our grounds you will find an extremely attractive tuck-shop. That is really important, I see!' and the small staff broke into laughter at the outburst of clapping, so emphatic and sincere in comparison with the polite but slightly doubtful applause of a moment before.

The girls laughed and checked themselves self-consciously, and she went on. 'The cottage belongs to Miss Abbott and her sister, who own the Squirrel Tea-Shop, which you passed as you came up the lane. The cottage which looks into our grounds will be open to you as a tuck-shop each day between two and three and between five and six o'clock; the Squirrel House, which is open to the public, is out of bounds, you understand. Now I have given you quite enough to talk about for the first evening! Matron asks me to say that all unpacking which is not finished must be done at once.'

'Ours isn't begun!' Sonia moaned. 'No time to talk over Rain's brainy ideas, my love!' to a Brighton friend from the Canaries, who came up to ask her opinion. 'Toil and hard labour for the Kingfishers! Come on, you two!' and the three hurried upstairs and set to work.

CHAPTER 6.

THE DANGER OF DAFFODIL

‘So we aren’t going to keep our golliwog lady to teach us gardening!’ Tamzine remarked next morning, as she dressed in the breeches and smock which Miss Rainey called ‘working kit,’ and surveyed herself in the mirror with much amusement. ‘Don’t I look a freak? They just yelled at home when I tried on the duds. I’ve always wanted to wear legs like this for boating and sailing, but Mother’s old-fashioned and she wouldn’t hear of it. I crowed over her when Miss Cathcart’s letter came, with full description and details.’

‘You look all right,’ Rhoda said. ‘I’m going to take Daffodil’s tip and put my hair out of the way, but only for outdoor work. I don’t want to grow up yet, but I really can’t garden in plaits.’

She coiled her dark hair over her ears in circles, while the other two watched with interest.

‘Will it stay up?’ Sonia asked.

‘Quite secure: I’ve been practising. But I shall wear it down at night.’

‘You look jolly nice,’ said Tamzine. ‘But not at all like our little rosebud. Shed those extra years when you put on a frock, I beg you!’

‘You bet I shall!’ Rhoda retorted. ‘What did you call Miss Durrant? She is rather like a golliwog, now you mention it.’

‘A fiery golliwog,’ said Sonia. ‘I gather we’re not to have her after Christmas.’

‘I gathered that somebody else was going to have her then,’ Rhoda remarked. ‘I wonder what he’s like?’

They went down to the dining-room, meeting their Stork and Canary friends with self-conscious grins. Letty, of the Parrots, gave a whoop at sight of Rhoda’s hair and dashed back into her room to dispose of her own pigtail. But Robin Brent shook her head.

‘Wouldn’t stay up for five minutes,’ she said. ‘I’ve quite enough to get used to without that.’

Rosalie eyed her cousin and then broke into a laugh. ‘You do look grown-up, Rhoda! I’m glad my hair isn’t long enough to be a nuisance. You look about thirty-five.’

‘Idiot kid! She doesn’t,’ Tamzine said indignantly. ‘She looks tophole.’

Miss Rainey privately thought so too, though she would have used another word. She laughed, as she looked at the newly grown-up members of her flock.

‘Dear me! How very businesslike! Perhaps you are wise, and you all look very neat. I hope you’ll still be as tidy by lunch-time.’

Miss Durrant laughed, and the girls smiled doubtfully.

‘But let us see your hair again in the evening and on Sundays,’ Miss Rainey added. ‘I don’t want you to turn finally into mature and elderly persons before you are eighteen. How do you like the feeling of your working smocks?’

‘Jolly nice! Very comfortable, thank you, Miss Rainey!’

‘They’ll be topping for working in,’ Tamzine added.

‘Easy and useful, I hope.’ Miss Rainey’s look discouraged ‘topping.’ ‘How many of you can drive a car?’ she asked.

Several girls responded eagerly, and all waited in keen curiosity to hear more.

‘And can you clean your car, and attend to it if anything goes wrong? Do you understand it inside as well as out? Could you do even simple repairs?’

‘No, not a thing,’ there was a shamefaced laugh.

‘I expected that. Our chauffeur is prepared to take you, a few at a time, and give you instruction in the mechanism of a car, and to teach any who wish to learn to drive.’

‘Oh, thank you, Miss Rainey!’ The girls looked at one another in delight.

The headmistress laughed and dismissed them, and Miss Durrant came across to the Kingfisher table. ‘You and the Robins are coming to me this morning. When your beds are made and your rooms tidied you will find me on the lawn behind the house.’

‘Yes, Miss Durrant,’ and the girls ran upstairs.

‘This is going to be fun!’ Tamzine cried. ‘Buck up, all of you! I’m keen to get started!’

They were all eager for the new experience, and Miss Durrant had no difficulty in keeping her small class interested. She was an unconventional teacher but an enthusiastic one, and the girls were thrilled to work under her.

‘It doesn’t matter where we start,’ she said briskly. ‘There’s plenty of practical work to be done. Later in the year, or on wet days, we will have lectures indoors and you shall make notes on what we have been doing. You want to understand garden management at the different periods and to have actual experience of it, so we’ll start on the ramblers. Your garden must have plenty of roses next June and you must prepare your arches now. Have you brought your gloves?’

‘I thought roses were pruned in the spring,’ Sonia exclaimed in astonishment.

‘Isn’t that only the bush roses?’ Robin Brent asked diffidently. ‘I think I’ve seen our ramblers being done in autumn.’

‘Right! You know something about it. Make a note of that, all of you; ramblers in autumn—these should have been done a month ago. Cut out your dead wood as soon as the flowering period is over. I did these myself last summer, before the house was sold; I don’t like to see them neglected.’

‘Oh, Miss Durrant, tell us!’ Daffodil cried. ‘Why were you here a year ago? We don’t understand that a scrap! Did you live here?’

‘I lodged at the Rose and Squirrel, and then at the inn.’ Miss Durrant was leading the way to the pergola, where the ramblers were waving long streamers which needed to be tied down. ‘My work was in a garden near Sheffield, and my lady boss inherited this place, which had been terribly neglected. My chum and I came to put the gardens in order before the house was sold. It was in a fearful state; we had a job, I can tell you! Now, no more chattering at present!’ and she began to show the girls what must be done.

‘Prickly business!’ Sonia murmured. ‘I thought the gloves were a silly fag, but I’ve changed my mind already.’

Miss Durrant heard. ‘I should think you’re thankful for them and for your long boots. What price stockings, in a job like this? And the thorns would tear your hair out. You’re very wise to put it out of sight.’

‘Yours goes out of sight, doesn’t it, Miss Durrant?’ Daffodil remarked. ‘When your hat’s on, nobody would believe you’ve really such a lot.’

‘My name is Golliwog,’ their new mistress said solemnly. ‘Or Shock-headed Peter. Be careful, Rhoda; that’s a new shoot. You want it for next year,’ she said presently.

‘Oh, sorry!’ Rhoda’s attention had wandered to Rosalie and Daffodil, who were working together a few yards from the rest. ‘I say, Tam!’ she murmured. ‘We’ll have to keep an eye on

those two.'

'I've been thinking that,' Tamzine responded, warily disentangling a prickly shoot from her hair. 'I shall tie my head up in a bag to-morrow. You mean, because they're the only kids in the school and so much of an age?'

'And so much younger than the rest of us. Fifteen's a lot younger than seventeen.'

'I've been watching them too,' Sonia joined in. 'What is Rosalie like? You're the only one who knows her.'

'All right by herself, but Daffodil will set her off. I rather wish Rosalie had been a Kingfisher.'

'Oh, Rho! We want "R.S.T." to ourselves. It was ripping of Rain to understand.'

'I know; I love her for it. But what she didn't understand was that Rosalie only needs somebody to follow and she'll do any mad thing. The boys, Geoff and Bill, could always count on her.'

'What Rain didn't know was that my Daffodil was really Till, the Merry Jester, who doesn't care two hoots what she does,' Tamzine exclaimed. 'If she'd known Till, she'd have separated Rosalie from her by the whole length of the school.'

'She'd have put Till in the rookery with Miss Durrant,' Rhoda remarked. 'She may find herself there yet.'

'She's done nothing very awful so far,' Sonia urged.

'She's making sure of Rosalie,' Tamzine said. 'I saw it; I was wondering if I'd better warn you, Rhoda. But we can't do anything. If you butt in and speak to Rosalie, you'll do more harm than good.'

'It would only make them mad,' Rhoda agreed. 'It would just throw Rosalie into Daffodil's arms.'

'Perhaps Robin will be able to help,' Sonia suggested. 'She seems very level-headed and sensible.'

'We'll wait and hope for the best. Perhaps they'll be too busy to fool about,' Rhoda said.

'What other jobs can you girls think of, that are urgent for the autumn?' Miss Durrant asked, going from one group to another.

'Putting in new roses?' Gwyneth suggested. 'We made a rose-garden one November.' Her eyes met Robin's.

'Good! Yes, put in your roses in November. Anything else?'

'Bulbs?' Robin asked. 'Don't you plant those in the autumn?'

'Very good; that's right. But there's still more; I shall give you notes on the work for each month.'

'Our garden's chiefly leaves in the autumn. The man's always sweeping them up,' said Daffodil. 'Leaves and bonfires.'

'You shall have a bonfire one day. Even in bonfires there are right and wrong ways of going to work. You live near London, don't you, Daffodil?'

'Yes, worse luck! Tam comes from Cornwall, lucky dog!'

'And Rosalie from Somerset,' said Miss Durrant. 'Her garden will be very different from yours or Tamzine's. What about Robin and Gwyneth? Where is the garden that has bulbs and roses?'

'In North Wales.' Robin smiled and coloured. 'We're very keen on it.'

'Good! Still another part of the country! You must all give me details and we'll compare notes.'

The gardening period passed too quickly. The girls were interested, and groaned at the thought of spending the rest of the morning with Miss Trevor reading French.

Miss Durrant laughed at their disappointment. 'The others must have their turn. Go and compare notes with them over your buns and milk.'

The gardeners raced indoors, to find that only eight girls had been working in the classroom, while four had spent a joyful time with the chauffeur, crawling under cars and learning about engines and mysterious inner workings.

'Our turn now!' Tamzine cried. 'I'm dying to drive!'

'Gwyn knows it all already,' Robin remarked. 'She's a jolly good driver and she understands the car.'

'I can drive, but I'd like to learn all about the works,' Rhoda began.

But their hopes were dashed by Miss Trevor, who swept the seven off to a French lesson, promising that they should go to the garage another day.

'We'll be an odd class,' Tamzine said. 'Sonny can jabber like a Parisian, and Rhoda's almost as good. I don't know about Robin and Gwyneth, but——'

'Not much good at French,' Gwyneth told her. 'If you'd like any Welsh now——!'

'Do you really speak Welsh?'

'You should hear them gabbling together,' said Daffodil.

'My Welsh isn't too good yet,' Robin admitted, 'Gwyn has taught me and she makes me speak. She's talked Welsh all her life.'

'Indeed, yes!' said Gwyneth. 'But not French.'

'The first division into classes will soon appear,' Sonia prophesied. 'The Kingfishers will be seniors. Tam, you'll have to pull yourself together and talk with Rhoda and me. You don't want to do verbs and grammar with the Robins.'

One lesson was enough to show Miss Trevor that she must divide her little class, and within a day or two the French and German lessons for the whole small school had been arranged on a new basis, and the Robins had several more added to their ranks, while the Kingfishers worked with other seniors who were nearer to their standard.

As the girls sat down to lunch, Miss Rainey surveyed them critically. 'I am going to be especially severe where your personal appearance is concerned,' she remarked, her tone half mocking but determined. 'You must not be allowed to think that because your work is largely out of doors and practical, you can be less particular than if you had spent the day in the classroom. Untidiness will mean penalties; probably extra indoor work and less time in the garden. I shall set you geometry problems to be worked out; it will be good for your mathematics.'

She laughed at the meaning glances that shot round. 'If you are very neat at every meal, you may avoid the geometry.'

Rhoda flushed, conscious that her plaits were more loosely coiled than they had been. Letty hurriedly tucked up a ragged end of hair. Robin smoothed a pigtail which had come into painful contact with the rambblers.

Daffodil gazed at the seniors with a superior air. 'I knew you'd all look awful sights by lunch-time,' she proclaimed, as Miss Rainey and the staff left the room.

'My dear babe, your hair's all over the place. Don't imagine that mop's tidy, for it's not,' Tamzine retorted. 'Run away and put yourself straight.'

'I've something else to do, thanks. Come on, Rosalie!' and Daffodil darted away.

'Rosalie, where are you going?' Rhoda demanded.

Rosalie paused. 'Into the garden, Rho,' she said meekly.

'What for? What are you up to?'

'Hadn't you better do your hair? It's coming right down,' Rosalie chuckled. 'Miss Rainey will be setting you long division sums and questions about railway trains and A and B and C.' And she raced after Daffodil.

'Just what I expected!' Rhoda groaned.

'Of course, Rain's right. We ought to have done this before lunch. But, I say! I know where those kids have gone!' Sonia exclaimed, as the three Kingfishers repaired damages in their cubicles.

'Where, wise one?'

'To the tuck-shop. Wasn't it to be open between two and three? They want to get in ahead of us.'

'It's their one idea at present,' Tamzine agreed. 'Their great ambition is to leave us behind. You're right, Son. Shall we go after them, or shall we be haughty and uninterested?'

'Oh, I want to see the gem of a tuck-shop Aunt Joan spoke about!' Sonia exclaimed. 'The babes will crow, but it won't hurt us.'

Rhoda was putting up her hair again. 'I like the feeling,' she explained, when Tamzine argued that there would be no more gardening to-day.

'Remember we've bagged the tennis-court for half-past two, and Helen's going to make our fourth. Sure those saucers of yours will stand tennis?'

'You won't set me sums, if they come down,' Rhoda said. 'Come on! We'll just have time for a glimpse at the gem. We must see if our infants are there. They may be up to something much worse.'

Others besides themselves had remembered the tuck-shop hours, and the Kingfishers went to look for it in a crowd of Storks, Parrots and Canaries. As they set out, Miss Durrant appeared and took the same direction.

'Oh, Miss Durrant, are you going for some toffee?' Tamzine cried. 'You know the tuck-shop people, don't you?'

'I'm going to the Squirrel House, which is out of bounds for you. A friend of mine is staying there for a day or two.'

'Oh, Miss Durrant! You don't mean—*him*?'

'You silly child, of course not!' Miss Durrant flung at her. 'Don't be absurd! He's abroad,' she added. 'But I can't see that it's any business of yours.' She turned from the girls and disappeared down a shrubby path.

'One for you, Son! I said she had a temper,' Tamzine laughed.

'It wasn't likely she'd have him anywhere about. And it isn't our business,' Rhoda agreed. 'Never mind, Sonny! Race me to the gem! We must get in our tennis, as we've bagged the court!' And they raced after the others, who had gone ahead to search for the promised tuck-shop.

CHAPTER 7. GAIL'S CORNER

'Oh! It is a gem! Your pretty Aunt Joan was right, Sonny,' Rhoda exclaimed.

The thatched cottage had lattice windows and a door standing invitingly open. It was very clean and newly done up, with yellow curtains at all the windows. A low wall enclosed a little garden, mostly grass, and a trellis-covered path led from the gate to the front door. Under the creepers of the trellis, over the gate, hung a board with a painted sign of two brown squirrels, and printed round them the name—'Gail's Corner.'

The first girls had hurried in, unheeding the sign, but Rhoda paused. 'How odd! Can't they spell? And I don't like that apostrophe. Shouldn't it be "Gales Corner"?''

'Doesn't seem to me very galey. I should have said it was particularly sheltered,' Tamzine remarked.

'But what else can it mean?'

'Could "Gail" be a name, Rho?' Sonia suggested. 'Then it would be all right—"Gail's Corner."'

'I never heard of it as a name.'

'Let's go in and see!' Tamzine led the way down the tiled path under the trellis.

'Just as we thought!' Rhoda said, as a well-known voice pealed out.

'But why shouldn't we? We're not doing any harm! You aren't a stuffy old bully, are you?'

'She isn't so much older than we are,' Rosalie rejoined.

There was a laugh from the Stork and Canary girls who had arrived first.

Tamzine and Rhoda pushed their way through the crowd of khaki smocks in the doorway. 'Let's know the worst!'

From the tiny passage, crowded with schoolgirls, they forced themselves into the front room, and gazed about them. Rosalie and Daffodil, perched on a wooden counter, swung their legs and stared back at them defiantly.

The room, surprisingly large for so small a cottage, was very fresh and clean, with cream-washed walls and yellow curtains. The shelves were stacked with boxes and bottles of sweets, with crockery and glasses; there were several small tables, and stools and chairs.

Behind the counter stood a girl of seventeen, looking very determined. She had wavy brown hair, cut short, and eager brown eyes, and she wore an overall of brown and yellow flowered cretonne.

'Will you please get off the counter?' she said, polite but definite. 'I'm ready to serve you with anything you want, but I can't have people sitting up there.'

'I don't see why not,' Rosalie began. But under Rhoda's look she quailed and slid to the ground. 'Oh, well! If you silly old things have arrived——'

'These are our respected elderly relations, who try to keep us in order,' Daffodil said airily to the girl of the tuck-shop. 'Guess we'll be going now. We wanted to get here first; these others are always coming in second. Come along, Rosalie mine! We haven't finished exploring yet!'

She dived under Tamzine's arm and shot through the crowd in the doorway. They laughed and made way for her, and Rosalie followed.

'Only too glad to see you go!' Tamzine called after the juniors.

The brown-eyed girl was serving Helen with caramels.

‘If any of you would like to order ices, I can have them for you to-morrow,’ she said. ‘They have plenty at the Squirrel House, but we weren’t sure if you’d want them. If you’ll order them the day before I’ll have them ready for you.’

‘But how can we possibly tell if we’ll feel like ices to-morrow?’ Letty cried, laughing.

‘I can. I always feel like ices,’ Tamzine declared. ‘I’m sorry my young cousin was being a nuisance,’ she addressed the tuck-shop girl. ‘It’s her little way. I call her Till Owlglass—Puck, you know.’

‘Oh, Till’s “Merry Pranks”!’ the girl broke into a laugh. ‘Is she as bad as all that? I’ll know what to look out for now! I’m glad you warned me. I love the “Merry Pranks” at a concert, but not in my shop.’

Tamzine regarded her with approval. ‘I didn’t think you’d know about Till.’

‘Please tell us your name!’ Sonia poked her friend in the back. ‘Don’t be rude, Tam! Other people may like music and go to concerts besides you.’

‘Are you Gail?’ Rhoda asked. ‘We saw your board and it puzzled us. At first we thought it meant GALES, and that the apostrophe was a mistake.’

‘I said you would. Like “Tea’s Provided,” on a wooden shed.’

‘Just like that. Is your name really Gail?’

‘It’s Abigail; Abigail Ann Alwyn.’ Gail handed a packet of chocolate to Letty and gave change for sixpence. ‘Thank you; will that be all? Gail seems enough for every day,’ she turned to Rhoda again. ‘I was always Gail at school.’

‘It’s jolly. We’ll call you Gail. We may, mayn’t we?’

Gail laughed. ‘That’s what the name of the cottage means. You must, if you’re coming to Gail’s Corner.’

‘I see. It’s an invitation? Jolly nice of you!’

‘It’s meant to be an invitation. I don’t want to be Miss Alwyn yet; I’m only just seventeen.’

‘It’s decent of you to run our tuck-shop for us.’ Tamzine’s remark was almost a question.

Gail responded to it frankly. ‘I wanted a job, and this one looks like being fun. I was going in for music; my family meant me to be a concert pianist. But I didn’t like the idea; I’ve had too much of it—concerts and recitals, and lessons and practising, all my life. I had a craving to do practical things, and I just couldn’t bear the thought of living in concert halls and playing to audiences all the time. Then I had a little accident and burnt my hand rather badly.’ She glanced at her left hand, which was slightly scarred. ‘One finger’s still stiff and it may never be quite right. So it seemed better to give up the thought of playing in public. As for teaching music, I should simply hate it. Somebody was needed for this job, and it was offered to me. I’m living with the Squirrel girls, but they’re too busy to take on this, too.’

‘Thank you so much for telling us!’ Rhoda exclaimed. ‘We couldn’t help being interested.’

‘So you know all about music and Till Eulenspiegel,’ Tamzine suggested.

Gail laughed again. ‘Oh, I know Till! But please tell me, is your cousin really——?’ and she paused.

‘Such a nuisance,’ Tamzine finished. ‘She’s just an infant. We never know what she’ll do. She and Rosalie—Rosalie is Rhoda’s cousin; this is Rhoda Kane—are the only juniors in the school, and it’s gone to their heads. At present their only idea is to go one better than us, and to leave us behind in everything.’

‘If they come here and are a nuisance, I shan’t know what to do.’ Gail looked frankly at the older cousins. ‘It’s the only thing I’m afraid of. I knew you were all to be seniors, and you’d be sensible and jolly; and I thought I could do the work quite well. But if anybody comes and makes a row, or won’t do what I say, I can’t do anything. I shall have to tell Rosamund and Elspeth that I’m not old enough for the job.’

‘Who are they? The people at the other house? It belongs to Miss Abbott, doesn’t it?’

‘The Squirrel House—yes; they’re the Squirrel girls. Can you make your cousins see that if they don’t behave when they come here, there may not be any tuck-shop?’

‘That would be tragic!’ Sonia exclaimed.

‘It would be a blow,’ Rhoda agreed. ‘We can’t have that happen. But I don’t believe they’ll bother you; they have a little sense!’

‘They won’t want to lose the tuck-shop,’ Tamzine’s tone was grim. ‘They’ll take good care that doesn’t happen. Is your hand really hurt—for good and all, I mean? It’s an awful pity, if you were going in for music. How did you do it?’

‘I can play all right. It isn’t too stiff for that. But I might find it a handicap for playing in public. As I don’t want to play in public, it really doesn’t matter.’ Gail swept the question of her injury aside. ‘How? Some kiddies were playing with candles in a shed, and the bass and shavings went alight.’

‘And you pulled the kids out?’ Tamzine and the others regarded her wide-eyed.

‘Would you have expected me to leave them in?’ Gail retorted. ‘I happened to be the person who reached them first. Any orders for ices for to-morrow?’

She wrote down the names, glancing at each girl in turn.

‘You mean to know us again,’ Rhoda said.

Gail had given a particularly quick look at her as she heard her name; that story about Geoff, Rhoda supposed; everybody had read it in the papers.

‘It will seem more friendly to know your names. The ices will be here to-morrow.’ Gail put away her list. ‘Isn’t it almost time for your afternoon classes? I’ve been especially warned not to keep you late.’

Sonia gave a shriek of dismay. ‘Tennis! We forgot all about it! Now it may be days before we can have the court again!’

‘You were too thrilling,’ Tamzine said to Gail.

‘Never mind, Son. We’ll get another chance soon. The others aren’t all keen,’ Rhoda comforted Sonia. ‘We’d better go. Rain’s lecturing at three o’clock, on the work of the Women’s Institutes—as if we hadn’t heard about the W.I. all our lives!’

‘I don’t suppose all of us have,’ Tamzine argued, as they said good-bye to Gail and hurried away.

‘I haven’t. I don’t know the first thing about what they do, and I don’t care. I wanted to play tennis,’ Sonia lamented.

‘Jolly kid in the tuck-shop,’ said Tamzine. ‘And I bet she did a jolly plucky thing when she pulled the kiddies out of the fire and hurt her hand. But we’ll never hear any more about it; at least, not from her.’

‘No, she’s said all she means to say. I like her too,’ Rhoda agreed.

They were crossing the lawn towards the house, the three Kingfishers a little apart from the rest, as usual, when with a wild rush Daffodil and Rosalie whirled down upon them.

‘Oh, Rho! Tam! Sonny! Such fun! We crawled through the garden—nobody saw—and there’s a little gate into another garden; and we went on, creeping like Indians or scouts——’

‘And we came to another house,’ Rosalie took up the tale. ‘There was a door, and it was open, and we lay in the bushes and watched. And we saw a leg, swinging about——’

‘In the air!’ Daffodil chortled. ‘With a boot on like ours. We crawled nearer, and we saw it was a school leg—by the breeches, you know—and we wondered who——’

‘It was Miss Durrant,’ Rosalie cried in triumph. ‘She was sitting on a table swinging her legs, with her hat off—awfully much at home. And she was talking hard, to such a pretty girl, who was sitting in front of a weird contrivance, all wooden bars and strings, and some gorgeous gold and silver threads across it.’

‘She was weaving; it was a loom. I saw one at an exhibition,’ said Daffodil, hanging on to Tamzine’s arm. ‘The thing kept moving, and something with thread on it was in her hands—gold thread or silk—and she passed it through the silver threads. She’s making something simply gorgeous. Do you suppose she’d let us see it? I want to know what it’s going to be.’

‘She was jolly pretty,’ said Rosalie again. ‘Tall and very fair. Who do you think she was? She couldn’t be that girl’s sister; she wasn’t in the least like her.’

‘“That girl’s” name is Gail Alwyn,’ Sonia remarked. ‘So you can call her Gail. We heard that Miss Durrant knew the tuck-shop people.’

‘The Squirrel girls,’ Rhoda added. ‘Gail called them Rosamund and Elspeth, didn’t she?’

‘Abbott. It would be one of them,’ Tamzine agreed.

‘Miss Durrant knows them,’ said Daffodil. ‘The weaving girl was bullying her. She said: “Don’t be a silly ass, Isabel!” I don’t think Miss Durrant looks like Isabel, do you?’

‘I don’t believe it was Isabel,’ Rosalie argued. ‘I heard the other one call her Liza. She said: “Oh, rot, Liza!” Liza isn’t short for Isabel.’

‘Neither of them’s good enough for Miss Durrant. She ought to have a pretty name; Liza’s hideous,’ said Rhoda.

‘I shall ask her what her name is.’

‘She’ll say it’s none of your business, Till,’ Tamzine suggested.

‘She’ll ask why you want to know. You’ll have to say you were crawling about on your front, where you had no right to be,’ Sonia pointed out.

‘Well, we’ve seen the Squirrel House and one of the Abbott girls, and the loom, and the lovely gold and silver weaving. None of you have seen any of that!’ Rosalie retorted, as they reached the house.

‘And you’ve made yourselves the most ghastly frights, creeping under bushes, and there are exactly six minutes till Miss Rainey’s lecture will begin,’ Tamzine said. ‘Rosalie, my love, your face is dirty; plain dirty.’

‘Oh, bother! It was those branches,’ and Rosalie fled.

‘While as for their hair——!’ Rhoda called after Daffodil, who was dashing up to the Robin room.

‘Six minutes is long enough,’ Daffodil hissed, over the banister-rail. ‘We shall be very beautiful in six minutes from now!’

CHAPTER 8.

SONIA TEMPTED

Handicrafts of all kinds had a strong appeal for Sonia Raymond, and she could not forget Daffodil's story of the loom and its glittering fabric in the Squirrel House. Tamzine, a music-lover, had been drawn to Gail Alwyn by her story, and was eager to see her again; she was a good violinist herself, and she found it impossible to believe that Gail's wrecked career was not a lifelong regret to her.

Rhoda's interests were more out-of-doors. She had grown up at Kentisbury, in the country, and had expected to live there for years; although her future was now uncertain, it seemed likely that if the Castle ceased to be her home, Verriton House would be at her mother's disposal, and that therefore country pursuits would still be more Rhoda's lot than town duties. She revelled in the gardening lectures which put into a practical light the matters she already loved; and she was eager for any instruction which would be useful in kennels or stables. She had ridden for years, but she looked forward to the riding lessons, which were to form part of the school life, as much as she did to the chauffeur's demonstrations on the care and mechanism of cars.

At the end of the headmistress's lecture on the work of the Women's Institutes, Sonia put an eager question.

'Miss Rainey, if they go in for craft work, oughtn't we to learn weaving and all that sort of stunt?'

'Weaving is rather ambitious,' Miss Rainey said, smiling. 'Looms are expensive and clumsy things, and would be beyond the reach of most Institutes, I imagine. But there are crafts which are much used, and you could do with some insight into these. As the winter comes on, we'll consider the idea of rug-making; and dressmaking and millinery are always useful. Oh, those aren't so attractive as weaving?'—at sight of Sonia's disappointed face. 'Were you hoping to learn spinning and dyeing too? We can't go so fast as that! But one thing you will need and you're going to have, and that is country-dancing. That, with singing, is a part of the work of almost every Institute. You learned one or two dances in gym class in Brighton, but real folk-dancing is very much more than that. We shall make a start at once.'

'Who's going to teach it?' Rhoda murmured.

'Isabel, I expect. Miss Durrant, you know,' Tamzine rejoined.

Miss Rainey went on to satisfy their curiosity.

'Our new gardening mistress, who will come to us in January, is a certificated folk-dancer. In the meantime, one of the friends from the Squirrel House has very kindly offered to give you weekly lessons, on Tuesday afternoons, and your friend at the tuck-shop will play for you. I'm sure you have all discovered the tuck-shop by this time. As long to the weather allows, you will dance on the lawn.'

She dismissed the girls, and in the interval before tea there was eager discussion of these new plans.

'This sort of school suits me!' Rhoda proclaimed. 'Country-dancing on the lawn as an afternoon class! Better than maths and history lectures!'

'Old Rain's talk was quite interesting, too,' Tammie added. 'I didn't know the W.I. were such bricks.'

‘I’d no idea it was such a big thing,’ Sonia admitted. ‘But she stamped heavily on my craving for weaving. I shall have to see Miss Abbott’s loom somehow! I wonder if she’d show it to us?’

‘You can’t ask her without giving our babes away. You aren’t supposed to know she has a loom,’ Tamzine pointed out.

‘Bother! No, we can’t get the baby Robins into a row.’

‘I wonder if the weaving Miss Abbott is the country-dancing one?’ Rhoda pondered. ‘Our W.I. does a good deal of that dancing, and it looks rather fun. I’ve never joined in, because we’d done so little at school, and they seemed to know a lot, and—well, one doesn’t want to——’ and she paused.

‘To give oneself away to the W.I., as not knowing so much as they do. True, O Lady Rhoda! One doesn’t,’ Tamzine agreed.

‘It’s true!’ Rhoda retorted. ‘I don’t mind joining in, if I can do things, but I’m not going to have village people hauling me through.’

‘Jolly well the best way is to know it better than the village, so that you can do the pulling through,’ Tamzine mocked.

‘Of course, Tam. Rhoda has to think of that,’ Sonia remonstrated. ‘She’s been brought up to feel that way.’

‘This jolly old school is going to be just what she wants. Send her home prepared to do everything better than anybody else!’

‘Knowing something about things, anyway,’ Rhoda suggested. ‘It’s a great idea! I’m getting very keen.’

‘I’m beginning to see the point,’ Sonia admitted.

‘As for seeing points,’ Tamzine began, ‘your young Rosalie’s hanging about, trying to make you see that she wants to talk to you, Rho.’

‘Yes, I noticed her. I’d better ask what’s up,’ and Rhoda left her friends. ‘Want me, Rosalie?’

Rosalie came running to her. ‘Only to talk to you, Rhoda. I haven’t had a chance to speak to you by yourself yet. You’re with those two all the time.’

‘And you’re always with Daffodil. What have you done with her now?’

‘She’s with Gwyneth and Robin. Rhoda, I suppose I’d better not tell her——’ and she paused.

‘If it’s anything serious. I shouldn’t.’

‘I think it’s just interesting, but you’ll say it’s serious. I mean about Billy nearly having Kentisbury, and all about that girl and the baby butting in. It’s a thrilling family story, and I’d like to tell Daffy.’

‘I hope you’ll have the sense to do nothing of the kind!’ Rhoda exclaimed. ‘It’s no business of hers. She’d have it all over the school in no time.’

‘Well, would it matter? I don’t mind!’

‘But I do! I don’t want the girls talking about our family affairs. Don’t tell her anything, Rosalie!’

‘But she’s told me all about her family, and I’d like to tell her about mine. She hadn’t anything as thrilling as Geoff and Bill and that horrid baby.’

Rhoda knit her brows. The unexpected arrival of the new heir to her brother’s title had been a tragedy to her, but to Rosalie it was only a romantic story, to be used to amuse her friends, although Rosalie was so much more nearly concerned. She could imagine Rosalie

holding the Robin room enthralled as she told how her brother had been robbed of his inheritance.

‘Don’t do it, Rosalie! Don’t tell anybody! I won’t have the girls talking,’ she cried.

Rosalie glanced at her curiously. ‘You care so much, old thing. It can’t be helped, so why worry? Bill didn’t really want to go into the House of Lords! He’d far rather be a sailor. Can’t you stop thinking about it?’

‘No, I can’t,’ Rhoda retorted. ‘And I wonder that you can. I hate the thought of that baby from India growing up to take Geoff’s place. If it couldn’t be Geoff I wanted it to be Bill. When Uncle Geoffrey dies, that baby will be the head of the family—unless, of course, Uncle Geoffrey has a son. I suppose he might, if he marries. In that case, that girl—oh, how I hate that girl! She has butted in, and you can’t say she hasn’t, Rosalie.’

‘Oh, she’s butted in all right! But it’s no use hating her. She’s going to be Uncle Geoffrey’s Countess. It is fearfully romantic, you know! I’d love to tell Daffodil and Robin and Gwyneth,’ Rosalie said wistfully.

‘You’re not to do it,’ Rhoda insisted. ‘I simply won’t have the whole school discussing our family, and bleating about—“So romantic! Such hard lines! So thrilling!” I couldn’t bear it.’

‘Oh, well, I won’t, if you feel as bad as all that! Not even Daffodil, Rho? I feel a bit mean, for she hasn’t kept secrets from me.’

‘How do you know?’ Rhoda retorted. ‘You aren’t going to tell her you’re keeping things to yourself, are you? She may have a hundred secrets. But I’m sure she hasn’t,’ she added.

‘So am I. She’d have told them to me by this time.’

Rhoda laughed, in spite of herself. ‘That’s exactly what I think about Daffodil! I’d trust Robin Brent, or Gwyneth, but I wouldn’t trust Daffy. Don’t chatter to her, Rosalie. Keep our family troubles to yourself. I wish you and Daffy would keep other things to yourselves, by the way! Why did you tell Sonny Raymond about that loom? She’s crazy to see it.’

‘In the Squirrel House?’ Rosalie’s eyes widened. ‘We’ll take her. Daffodil and I will show her the little path; it’s quite easy. Oh, do come, all you three! We’d love to show you!’

‘I’m sure you would, but you’re forgetting that it happens to be out of bounds, infant.’

‘Does that matter? Nobody knows that we went there.’

‘People will know, if Sonny asks for leave to go and see the loom.’

Rosalie stared at her. ‘But you wouldn’t—Sonny wouldn’t——’

‘No,’ Rhoda agreed. ‘She wouldn’t. You two have made her desperately keen to see the thing; she talks about it all the time. But she can’t do anything, because it would mean giving you away. You’re a downright nuisance; or Daffodil is. I expect she was at the bottom of it.’

‘No, I was. I said: “Let’s go and see the other houses!” and she said: “Righto!” and we went. I’m awfully sorry, Rhoda. I didn’t know Sonny would be so keen. Isn’t there any other way? Couldn’t we slip off, and go and have a look at the loom? Or—or could we go at night?’ Rosalie’s eyes began to dance. ‘Oh, Rho—do! We could slip out and rush across the lawn and creep into the Squirrel House! You aren’t too grown-up for a midnight adventure, are you? I’m sure Tamzine isn’t!’

‘I hope you won’t put it into her head, or into Daffodil’s silly head either!’ Rhoda cried. ‘It’s just the mad sort of thing——’ and she paused.

‘That Tamzine would love!’ Rosalie finished the sentence. ‘I’m sure that’s what you were going to say! Tamzine looks sporting enough for anything! Oh, Rho, it would be such fun!’

‘I was going to say—that Tam would have loved when she was a kid of your age,’ Rhoda retorted. ‘We’re too old now——’ and she paused again.

‘I don’t believe it! I don’t!’ Rosalie cried. ‘You’d love it yourself, Rhoda Kane, and you know the others would. You think you must pretend to be grown-up, but you’re simply dying to have an adventure! What harm would there be in going to have a squint at the loom? That jolly girl wouldn’t mind our seeing it!’

‘Then suppose you go and ask her to invite us,’ Rhoda suggested. ‘Explain at the same time how you happen to know about her loom.’

‘Oh, but it would be far more fun the other way!’

Rhoda, conscious of the truth of this, turned on her sharply. ‘Rosalie, please don’t be an idiot! You’re supposed to have some sense here, and not to go in for kids’ tricks.’ She walked away leaving Rosalie staring after her.

‘She’s tempted!’ Rosalie murmured. ‘I know Rhoda! She’d love it. If only those three could get into a row, quite soon, they’d be a lot more human for the rest of the term! I shan’t suggest this to Daff, as Rhoda asked me not to say anything; but I shouldn’t be surprised if Sonny Raymond thinks of it for herself. If she does, they’ll need us to show them the way; they couldn’t go hunting for unknown paths in the dark—not through those bushes! Daff and I won’t be left out!’ and she nodded in triumph, as she raced off to find her chum.

Sonia’s craving for a sight of the loom continued to grow, and she protested loudly that she would question Miss Durrant on the subject, if she did not tackle the weaving lady herself.

‘If she turns up on Tuesday to teach us “Rufty Tufty,” I shall find some way to ask her,’ she said, in the seclusion of the Kingfisher room, that Thursday evening.

‘You can’t. You know what will be the first thing she’ll say,’ Tamzine argued. ‘If you want to see that loom you’ll have to go crawling on your front, as the kids did.’

‘That wouldn’t be quite the thing.’ Sonia said, but her tone was wistful, ‘Could I talk to Gail?’

‘You could, but I don’t see what good it would do.’

‘She wouldn’t give us away. She’s only a kid herself.’

‘No, but she can’t take you to see the loom,’ Rhoda remarked.

‘There is something I can ask her, though!’ and Sonia went in triumphant eagerness to the tuck-shop on Friday afternoon.

Gail was handing out ices to a group of Canary girls. Rosalie and Daffodil, busy on some plan of their own, were not present.

Sonia leaned on the counter and coaxed Gail into conversation. ‘We hear you’re going to play for our country-dancing. It’s jolly decent of you.’

‘It will be fun. I like the music; I’ve been having a look at it.’

‘What are you going to play? We can’t take a piano outside every time. Do you play something else as well?’

Gail laughed. ‘Rosamund wanted me to learn to play a penny whistle. She says it’s perfect for dancing. But your headmistress has found a funny little outdoor piano, that’s easy to lift—a dulcitone, she calls it; an odd thing with one pedal and a sound like an old spinet. Rosamund loves it and says it fits the dances even better than a pipe. I’m getting used to it, though it’s weird after a piano.’

‘You said “Rosamund” came from the Squirrel House. Is she the Miss Abbott who’s going to take our class?’

‘She dances beautifully; I’ve watched her, at a party on a village green, with a maypole in the middle. Miss Abbott is her aunt.’ There was an odd twinkle in Gail’s brown eyes.

‘What’s funny about that?’ Tamzine demanded. ‘Aunts aren’t particularly amusing?’

‘Some of them are,’ said Rhoda. ‘Why is Miss Abbott so funny as an aunt, Gail?’

‘Wait till you’ve seen her!’

‘We don’t get a chance. Why is the Squirrel House out of bounds?’ Sonia urged. ‘We want to see it!’

‘Oh, well, all sorts of people go there. And there’s the inn next door, just across the Squirrel garden—the Dragon. Miss Rainey can’t have you meeting just anybody.’

‘Might catch something,’ said Tamzine. ‘We must respect Rain’s prejudices, old Son. But it seems a bit silly to me. We might as well go to the Squirrel House for our ices, while we’re at it.’

‘Oh, but it’s jollier to have Gail to ourselves!’ said Rhoda. ‘And her little house is so pretty.’

‘This is two rooms made into one,’ Gail explained. ‘It’s all been freshly done up for me—and you!’

‘Tell us more about the Miss Abbott who’s going to teach us, Gail!’ Sonia coaxed. ‘What does she do? Anything besides helping her old aunt in the tea shop?’

Gail’s peal of laughter made the other girls turn from their ices to ask what was happening.

‘I don’t know!’ Tamzine declared. ‘Sonny asked a perfectly simple question, and Gail went off into a shriek.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Gail cried. ‘But it really was funny. I’m afraid I can’t gossip about my employers.’

‘N-no, I suppose not. Sorry we asked you,’ Sonia apologized. ‘We weren’t trying to pump you. At least——’ she reddened. ‘Perhaps I was. I’m very sorry; it wasn’t fair. But we do want to know about the one who’s going to take us for country-dancing.’

‘You’ll see her soon. She isn’t here all the time,’ Gail volunteered the information. ‘But she spends a few days each week at the Squirrel, and your classes will be fitted in during her visits.’

‘Where does she go at the week-ends?’

‘Home,’ said Gail briefly. ‘Will that be all for to-day?’

Sonia sighed. ‘You’re very firm! Yes, thanks.’

‘We shan’t dig anything out of Gail!’ she said gloomily, as she went back to school with the others.

‘You dug a good deal in the time,’ Tamzine replied consolingly.

‘I wanted to know if “Rosamund” is the weaving girl.’

‘Our babes will be able to tell us that, as soon as they see her. I’ll tell Rosalie to give me a meaning look,’ Rhoda promised.

‘I wish Tuesday afternoon would come!’ Sonia groaned.

CHAPTER 9.

ROSAMUND'S PARTY

In Sonia's present frame of mind, an announcement made by Miss Rainey on Saturday morning was very welcome.

'Miss Rosamund, from the Squirrel House, has offered to give you an extra dancing lesson this morning. As a rule we shall give some time on Saturdays to mending, but you cannot have much in that way to do yet. So I have thanked Miss Rosamund on your behalf, and she will be here at half-past eleven. Some of you can carry out the dulcitone.'

'Oh, cheers!' Sonia murmured. 'Isn't "Miss Rosamund" a dear?'

'Apparently we don't need to call her Miss Abbott,' Rhoda said. 'Anyone would think you were desperately keen on country-dancing, Sonny!'

'I'm not a scrap keen. I'd rather have real dancing, but I don't mind jiggling about to please Rain and Miss Rosamund! But I want to see *her*! You'll tell Rosalie to wink, won't you?'

'We're all going to watch Rosalie and Daffodil for winks,' Tamzine remarked. 'I'm quite keen; I love all the tunes that I've heard. I'd like to have a shot at playing for dancing some day.'

'I think it will be rather fun,' Rhoda said. 'It's so much more lively than ordinary dancing. I like something with some "go" in it.'

'Try an eightsome reel,' said Jean, a red-haired girl from the Highlands.

'I'd love it! I've seen country-dances that looked just like your reels. Come and look at Gail's baby piano!'

The girls gathered round the dulcitone, as Daffodil and Rosalie came staggering out of the house, carrying it between them. Tamzine raised the lid, and Rhoda struck a chord.

'Tinkly! But very pretty,' she said, playing a few thin notes. 'Just like a spinet or harpsichord, as Gail said. I wonder if it will be loud enough?'

Miss Durrant had come towards the group. 'You'll need your plimsolls. Rosamund won't let you dance in gardening boots,' she said. 'I'm going to join in. You can't do anything with nineteen! I've done some dancing, but I'll enjoy doing some more.'

'Oh, Miss Durrant, be my partner!' There was a chorus of invitation.

'I shall open the ball with Rosalie Kane.'

'But what am I to do?' Daffodil cried. 'Rosalie's my partner!'

Miss Durrant laughed. 'You two would be too wild, if you danced together. Rhoda will take pity on you, I'm sure.'

'Tell us about Miss Rosamund!' Sonia begged, when they gathered for the class, all equipped with rubber shoes.

Miss Durrant glanced round the circle. 'She won't like us in these smocks. I bet anything you like—I mean?—she caught herself up hurriedly—I'm firmly convinced that in a week or two she'll have you all in summer frocks for dancing. She won't approve of breeches.'

A smothered giggle had greeted her indiscretion. The girls were used by this time to unorthodox speech from their gardening mistress.

'Does she know a lot of dances?' Rhoda asked. 'A dreadful thing happened once in our village. The W.I. had had lessons from a school teacher, and thought they knew a lot. Then

someone else took them on, and she said they were doing it all wrong. She taught them all different ways, and the poor things didn't know where they were, or what or who was right.'

'Will it be like that with us, when the new person with certificates comes after Christmas?' asked Rosalie.

Miss Durrant laughed. 'No, it will not. You needn't worry. Ros has the headquarters' certificate. Her country-dancing is first-class; she won't teach you anything wrong. You're safe with her.'

'Oh, I'm glad!' Rhoda exclaimed.

'Ros!' Tamzine murmured. 'We are getting familiar, although we haven't seen her yet!'

'We'll see her now!' Sonia exclaimed. 'Here comes Gail—in a pretty green frock instead of her pinafore. And somebody with her; all right, Rosalie?'

Rosalie's nod was eloquent, and Sonia was satisfied. She might not be able to ask about the loom for some time, but she would know Rosamund, the weaving girl.

Rosamund, wearing white, came across the lawn to the little piano and laid a pile of music on it. She was tall, with yellow hair coiled low on her neck, and she walked lightly, with a movement which told, to anyone who understood, of years of folk-dancing. Her eyes were very blue and were alight with eager interest as she turned to the girls.

'Take your partners!' she called. 'Make two lines down the centre of the room—as we say indoors! Two lines, with the music at the top.'

'I know,' Tamzine exclaimed, holding out her hand to Sonia. 'Lead your woman down and turn her under; skip her back and swing your partner! These things in lines are all alike.'

'That's where you're wrong,' Rosamund rejoined promptly, overhearing the remark. 'People think that's so, but it isn't. I expect you've done "Haste to the Wedding" or "Pop goes the Weasel." This is something quite different.'

Tamzine looked at her, scarlet and amused. 'I didn't mean you to hear, Miss Abbott.'

'I'm not Miss Abbott; she's my aunt. I'm just Rosamund, and I've come to give you some of the dances I love best myself,' the retort came quickly. 'It isn't a school class; it's a party on the lawn, and I'm the M.C., giving a few directions before you start. I offered to do it because it seemed so sad that you should wait till January and miss all these lovely autumn days, when you could use the lawn. If anyone doesn't care about coming to my party, I'd much rather she'd go away. I only want people who are keen and who'll enjoy it.'

'What a gorgeous way to look at it!' Tamzine exclaimed.

'The alternative is mending or practising,' said Miss Durrant.

Rosamund laughed. 'At least my party will be more exciting than those! Shall we start? Take hands-four; oh—sorry! Make small rings of two couples! Now—those with their backs to me are Ones, those facing me are Twos. You're sure of that? Keep your same number till you reach the end of the line, then change; I'll take care of you when you change your number. Play the tune, Gail; listen, everybody! It's "Christchurch Bells." Do you know it?'

'Isn't it a song?' Rhoda ventured. 'We've never done it as a dance.'

Rosamund nodded, her foot tapping to the rhythm of the tune. 'Lots of the dances were songs. Not so fast, Gail! Now, first man in each set gives right hand to second woman.'

The girls grasped her directions quickly, and in a very few minutes the dance was in full swing. Rosamund made them practise the brisk clapping and the 'cast,' but almost at once insisted on the movements being fitted to the music. As soon as the girls knew what they had to do, they were urged to try it with the tune, so that the music and movements should go together in their minds. Very soon they were all dancing, wildly perhaps, but with enjoyment,

and with much laughter when the neutral couples joined in and had to reverse all their previous 'handing.'

Presently Rosamund called a halt. 'Look here, you people! Trust the couple coming up or down the line to you. They've been doing it all the way; they won't suddenly go wrong. If second woman wants to give right hand, let her, new first man! She's correct; don't insist on giving her your left.'

The advice was helpful, and the dance went more smoothly. Rosamund watched with amused eyes and gave occasional criticism.

'Are we so frightfully funny?' Rhoda challenged her, when they stopped to rest. 'You looked as if you were trying not to laugh.'

'You're all so extremely vigorous,' Rosamund explained. 'You'll tone down when you've done some dancing. It was very good, for a first time. But I don't really like your legs for dancing; couldn't you wear light frocks on Tuesday? Why, what's funny in that?'—as a shout of laughter went up and the girls all looked at the gardening mistress.

'I told them you'd have them in frocks in a week or two,' said Miss Durrant. 'I wish I'd changed, to set them a good example.'

She looked very hot, and her flaming hair was tossed about; like the girls, she was hatless.

'You ought to have known,' Rosamund agreed. 'Truly, girls, you'd be much more comfortable and much cooler. Try tennis frocks next week! You're still too wild, you know, Lisabel,' she added in an undertone. 'Can't you remember it's dancing, not a gym stunt?'

'Is it Isabel?' Tamzine murmured.

'I don't believe she said Isabel,' Rhoda rejoined.

'We'll have a round dance now.' Rosamund began to explain her wishes. 'Make two rings, with your partner by your side; five couples in a ring, four is more usual, but five's all right, so long as the rings have the same number in them; and there are twenty of you. First couple with their backs to the music; oh, don't funk!'—as Rhoda and Rosalie hurriedly moved round, leaving Miss Durrant and Daffodil to lead the dance. 'Your turn will come next time! Number counter-clock; yes, it's unusual, I know. Second couple on the right of the first; don't forget your number; it's very important! Tune, please, Gail!'

'I want to join in,' Gail said plaintively. 'That first one looked so jolly! Couldn't anybody take turns with me? I'll watch while I'm playing; I'll know it by the end.'

'If you'll lend me the music, I'll practise it, and next week I'll fiddle and you can dance,' Tamzine suggested.

'Perhaps I could play the spinet,' Rhoda added.

'I know I can learn the dances by watching,' Gail pleaded.

'Sure you can. I don't mind; I'd like you to dance. You'll play still better, if you're a dancer,' Rosamund agreed. 'But this particular one is "Sage Leaf," young woman, and you'll have your work cut out counting five, without learning the dance. You have to repeat all but the A music five times; once for each couple; and don't you forget it! Watch which couple is leading, by all means; you'll find it will help. But don't let us down by cutting out fifth couple's lead. Now, people! Take hands in a big ring. Eight slips clockwise, and eight back to places.'

'Where's a clock?' Sonia cried in distress. 'Which way is it? Oh, Miss Rosamund? Left or right?'

'Left,' Rosamund told her, laughing, and the ring nearly took Sonny off her feet.

'Do you like the tune, Gail Ann?' Rosamund asked, standing beside the dulcitone.

‘Not the A bit. I like the rest. But it repeats too much.’

‘We’ll have “Hit and Miss” next. That’s for four, so it will take them all in. When we want Sixes, Lisabel and somebody will have to sit out.’

‘If two of them play and she sits out it will come right,’ Gail observed.

‘True, Abby Gail! Keeping accounts is good for your arithmetic!’

Gail laughed. ‘But we must take turns. They must all learn “Put on Thy Smock on a Monday!”’

‘They’ll like the name. Do you like “Sage Leaf”?’ Rosamund went to speak to a group of girls who had collapsed on the grass and were panting and fanning themselves.

‘Topping fun! You do know jolly dances, Miss Abbott!’

‘You’re all convinced I’m Miss Abbott! I don’t want to be Miss Anybody. You’re very polite, but I’d like to be called just Rosamund.’

‘Oh, *may* we?’ There was an eager shout. ‘Really and truly, like friends?’

‘Do you like my dancing?’ Rosamund demanded. ‘We can’t possibly be friends unless you like my dancing!’

‘We love it! It’s fun!’ Sonia cried.

‘It’s marvellous!’ Tamzine declared.

‘Then we are friends and you may call me Rosamund.’

‘Lovely of you to ask us!’ Rhoda commented.

‘Won’t you please tell us Miss Durrant’s name—Rosamund?’ Tamzine pleaded, with laughing eyes. ‘We’re so puzzled! I don’t believe it’s Isabel. What do you call her?’

‘I call her Lisabel, but the whole of it is Elisabeth; Elizabeth and Isabel put together.’

‘Oh, how quaint! But it’s pretty, and it suits her. Isabel didn’t seem quite right for her, somehow.’

‘But she’s part of your school staff,’ Rosamund warned them.

‘We’ll remember to call her Miss Durrant! But we heard you say some odd name and we were curious.’

Rosamund laughed, knowing very well that Miss Durrant would be referred to in private as Lisabel.

‘Ready for another dance? Make up sets of four. No, it’s not “Rufty Tufty.” We’ll do “Hit and Miss.”’

‘Rosamund reads our faces like a book!’ Rhoda murmured, as she led Sonia into a square. ‘I think she’s taught lots of classes!’

Rosamund confirmed this, when the question was put in the next interval. ‘I’m not a teacher; but I’ve taught village classes and Guides and so on, for years. I’ve not done any lately; it’s jolly to have a class again. And such a lovely class!’

The girls laughed. ‘We ought to curtsy, but we can’t in these smocks!’

‘You’ll dance better in frocks. You want to feel the swing of your skirts; you’re leggy in those things. Now make lines again and I’ll give you “Corn Rigs.” It has a lead-down,’ she said to Tamzine. ‘But the step’s different. I don’t suppose you’ve met polka step in country-dancing. I think you’ll like it.’

The girls were fascinated by the new step, and at the end of ‘Corn Rigs’ they broke into spontaneous clapping. ‘That’s tophole! Great, that one is!’

Rosamund’s face lit up. ‘I hoped you’d like it. I nearly tore Lisabel from Daffodil and joined in myself. Sonia, you looked too serious; what’s the matter? Your nice young man clasped you in his arms and swung you beautifully; why not look more cheerful about it?’

There was a shout of laughter, and Tamzine, the nice young man, bowed with dignity.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sonia reddened. ‘I was thinking of something else.’

‘Very rude to your partner! He had asked you to dance—or perhaps you asked him? Time’s up, I’m afraid; that will have to do for to-day. I must go and help my aunt! She has customers at the Squirrel House on Saturdays. She’d have liked to come and join in, but she had too much to do.’

‘Your aunt? Would she care about dancing?’ Sonia asked in surprise.

Gail, gathering up the music, laughed.

‘She says she’d like to try,’ Rosamund said seriously. ‘Leave the music on the baby piano, Gail Ann! Some of the girls will practise, and then they can take turns with you.’

‘There’s something odd about Rosamund’s aunt!’ Rhoda said, as Gail and Rosamund went together across the lawn. ‘I shall ask Gail when we go to the tuck-shop.’

‘She’ll squash you, as she did Sonny.’

‘She may not; I shall try, anyway. Did you see Rosamund’s ring? She’s going to be married too.’

‘A lovely ring,’ Tamzine agreed. ‘Wonderful diamonds; she must be going to marry a duke, or a millionaire.’

‘We might ask Lisabel—isn’t it an odd name? Perhaps she’d tell us about him,’ Sonia said.

Miss Durrant was not communicative on the subject of her friend’s future husband. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you anything about him,’ she said, and left the girls wondering whether she did not know or did not feel at liberty to tell.

‘What were you so solemn about, partner?’ Tamzine demanded. ‘Your nice young man feels quite hurt! What happened to your usual sunny nature? Didn’t it like “Corn Rigs”? Or was it worrying over its polka step?’

‘I was wondering how I could ask Rosamund to show me her loom, without giving Rosalie and Daffodil away. Perhaps she wouldn’t mind, if we told her they’d been Peeping Toms. She’s so jolly; she might only laugh.’

‘I don’t believe she’d laugh,’ Rhoda said. ‘I think she wouldn’t like it. She might freeze up and be Miss Abbott again.’

‘Miss Somebody-Else. We haven’t heard her name,’ Tamzine remarked. ‘But it isn’t Abbott.’

‘Something about her makes me feel it wouldn’t do to go too far,’ Rhoda added. ‘She’s perfectly friendly, but she has a touch of something—as if she could be haughty and dignified.’

‘Sort of Lady-of-the-Manor air? I believe you’re right, O Lady Rhoda,’ Tamzine agreed. ‘I suppose you’ve seen the kind of thing before. I believe our Rosamund could be dignified too! Perhaps we’d better be a tiny bit careful not to go too far.’

‘She’s been friendly. If we take advantage, and ask too many questions, or try to make her go farther still, she may sheer off and have no more to do with us,’ Rhoda went on. ‘Don’t tell her about those silly kids, Sonny. I believe she’d take it badly.’

Sonia sighed. ‘Then I can’t ask her to show me her loom. I want to watch her weaving. Perhaps we could talk to her one day, and I could lead the conversation round to handicrafts! She might say something that would give me a chance.’

‘She hasn’t time for anything but dancing. You can see how keen on it she is,’ Rhoda said.

Sonia groaned. ‘I simply must see that loom! I’ll manage it somehow, if I have to go at night, and peer through the window as Rosalie did!’

CHAPTER 10. CAPTAIN TAMZINE

Rhoda's question—'What is there so funny about Rosamund's aunt?'—brought a peal of laughter from Gail.

'Who said there was anything funny about her?'

'You did!' Rhoda asserted. 'Your face said it when Sonny asked if she'd care about dancing.'

'Are you really always sunny?' Gail handed a glass of lemonade to Sonia, who carried her tennis racket and looked hot.

She reddened still more deeply. 'It's a silly nickname.'

'It isn't her temperament, it's her hair,' Tamzine explained. 'With that halo of sunny curls, what else could we call her? Don't throw the lemonade over me, old Son! You're our sunny little sunbeam.'

'I wish my hair was black and straight!'

'But about the aunt, Gail!' Rhoda persisted. 'Did she really mean to learn to dance? She must be an old sport!'

Gail rocked with laughter. 'I shan't tell you anything about her! You'll see her some day. No, really, I'm not going to chatter about Rosamund's relations. You can ask her yourself—but I don't advise you to try.'

'You mean she'd crush us!' Rhoda groaned. 'I felt like that about her.'

'Are you practising the music?'

'Yes, but it's not as easy as it looks. Tam and I are going to try on Tuesday, and you shall dance. I suppose you can play any dances at sight, if Rosamund asks for them?'

'Oh, yes!' Gail said lightly. 'They're simple; I can read any of them. But I don't like having to count for five couples.'

'Somebody should stand beside you and count. Isn't the dulcitone odd to play on, after a piano?'

'Yes, but I like it for those dances. It seems to fit the style of the music, and it carried better than I expected. It makes me think of a harpsichord.'

'Rhoda calls it a spinet,' Tamzine said.

Gail nodded. 'That sort of thing,' and she turned to serve Rosalie Kane with peppermints.

'Why will you buy those smelly things?' Rhoda demanded, when her cousin and Daffodil came out together.

'Cause we like them. Do you want us to show you the way to Rosamund's house? Then you could see the loom,' Daffodil hinted.

'Oh, Daff! We weren't to put it into their heads!' Rosalie said reproachfully.

Sonia turned with startled eyes. 'I hadn't thought of that! I say, suppose you did?'

'Daffodil, go away! You're an idiot!' Rhoda cried.

'It would have to be after dark,' Sonia wavered. 'But we could take torches. Is it hard to find?'

'So-so. You couldn't find it in the dark without us,' Daffodil said promptly. 'But we could show you. We've been scouting round, and we've discovered the little path Rosamund comes by. She didn't crawl through the bushes in her white frock!'

‘It would be awful if she caught us!’ Rhoda exclaimed. ‘She’d just wither us up! Son, it would be frightfully risky! Can’t you wait till you know her well enough to ask her?’

‘Sonny’s patience is at breaking-point.’ Tamzine gave her friend a shrewd look. ‘She can’t wait much longer. It would be rather a joke, Rho! We three could easily slip down the back stairs, and Robin and Gwyneth wouldn’t give the kids away, though I don’t think they’d want to join in.’

‘I can’t imagine Robin Brent doing anything so mad.’

‘But you would do it!’ Rosalie cried. ‘She isn’t really stodgy, Tamzine! Sonny, she wants to do it! She loves adventures; I could tell you things we’ve done, when I’ve stayed at the Castle! She’s only being proper because she thinks she ought to. Tam, if you and Sonny will come with Daffodil and me, Rhoda won’t be left out!’

‘You’re very cheeky, with your Sonny and Tam, young woman!’ Tamzine said severely. ‘Run away and play with Till Owlglass in some corner. We’ve had enough of you.’

‘They want to talk it over,’ Rosalie said. ‘Come on, Daff! We’ll leave them to think about it!’

‘You’ve done quite enough harm for one day,’ Rhoda called after them.

Left alone, the Kingfishers looked at one another.

‘Come up to our room and talk about this!’ Sonia said breathlessly. ‘I hadn’t thought of it, but Daffodil’s quite right. They could show us the way, and we could see the loom, without saying a word to anybody. Oh, Tam, will you come?’

Tamzine, strongly tempted, looked at Rhoda. ‘It wouldn’t really do any harm. We only want to look at the thing.’

‘Come up to our room.’ Rhoda agreed with Sonia on that point, at least. She raced upstairs, and the other two followed at her heels.

‘Why shouldn’t we, Rho?’ Sonia cried, as soon as the door was safely closed.

‘Well, for one thing, those two infants will crow over us for ever, if we do.’

‘Let them! Why should they, anyway?’

‘Our authority over them, such as it is, will be gone,’ Tamzine agreed. ‘I see that, Rho. But does it amount to anything? I can’t see that they pay much attention to us at present!’

‘We’d live it down,’ Sonia pleaded. ‘We’d boss them; we’d pile it on a bit. And we’d have seen the Squirrel House and the loom! I’d love to go at night! Could we do it without Daffodil and Rosalie?’

‘It would waste too much time,’ Tamzine said. ‘They know just where to go. We’d have to look for the place.’

‘It’s no worse than the things we used to do last winter, Rho,’ Sonia argued. ‘We’ve been in plenty of rows! Why must we be stodgy grown-ups all of a sudden?’

‘Because—I can’t explain, Son,’ Rhoda said helplessly. ‘I only know it feels worse now. Perhaps it’s because Miss Cathcart and Miss Rainey are treating us as grown-up students, not as schoolgirls. They don’t expect us to behave like kids, and they aren’t on the look-out for that kind of thing. I feel we’ll be letting them down.’

Tamzine sat leaning over the end of her bed and gazed at Sonia, who was moving about restlessly.

‘There’s something in it, Son. Rhoda isn’t being stodgy; she’s jolly well right. But all the same I’m inclined to plunge into crime for your sake. I know how keen you are; and of course I’d love the fun.’

'I feel bad because Rosamund has been so jolly and friendly, too,' Rhoda went on. 'It feels like going behind her. If we go into her house, in the dark and uninvited, she'll be furious if she ever finds out.'

'Oh, but she wouldn't know!' Sonia exclaimed. 'We'd go when she wasn't there. And we'd be like mice. We'd only look and creep away.'

Rhoda shook her head. 'It's going behind her, even if she never knows. I don't like it.'

'Do you mean that you won't go with us, if Sonny and I decide to go?' Tamzine asked.

Rhoda hesitated. It was her chance to make a stand. But would they go without her? She thought they would. It would ruin the companionship of the Kingfishers—the old 'R.S.T.' of the Brighton school—if she held out. And could she bear it? Could she lie in bed, knowing what Sonny and Tam were about? Rhoda knew that would be too hard.

'I'll go, if you go,' she said. 'But I wish you wouldn't. I don't like it.'

'Look here, old thing!' Tamzine spoke persuasively. 'Don't be old and staid before your time! It won't hurt anybody. We've been marvellous all this term; can't we have one little spree?'

'All term! We haven't been here a week. Tam, you are a goat!' Rhoda struggled to hold to her principles.

'I want the fun of the thing, and I don't see that it's such a dreadful crime,' Tamzine argued. 'Sonny doesn't care whether it's a crime or not; she must see that loom, and the sooner the better. You don't care about either the loom or the jaunt or the crime, but you'll go to back us up. Yours is the most noble position, old dear! In other words, you're a sport to come with us. Now let's settle the details. When? The sooner the better, I say; therefore, to-night.'

'Didn't somebody say Rosamund went away for the week-end? Didn't Gail say she went home, wherever that is?' Sonia asked. 'She might not be there to-night, Rho.'

'If I thought she wouldn't be there—but that's an awful thing to say!' Rhoda groaned.

'Oh, bosh! Of course we'll like it better if she isn't there! It is a crime, and burglary, and frightful cheek; we know that!' Tamzine said breezily. 'But we don't care two hoots; I don't! And Son will risk anything for that loom. If Rosamund does happen to be there, she won't know anything about it; she'll be sound asleep after her labours—teaching her lovely class and helping her old aunty with the teas! We shall be like mice, and nobody must sneeze. Is your torch in good order, Sonny Raymond? I'm Captain of the expedition.'

'Newly filled and I haven't used it yet. It is decent of you, Tam! It's all because I'm so keen.'

'It's decent of us both,' Tamzine agreed. 'But it's decentest of Rho, because she has scruples. Produce your torch, Lady Rhoda!'

'Don't!' said Rhoda. 'I'm not behaving like Lady Rhoda just now.'

'All right, if that's how you feel. Just Rhoda Kane, for the time being! Your torch, madam?'

'Here; it's all ready. We'd better change into morning things before we go.'

'Sure,' Tamzine nodded. 'Boots and breeches for schoolboy sprees. Now let's interview the babes!'

Rosalie and Daffodil were in the Robin room, eagerly awaiting the summons, and came tumbling over one another in their excitement as soon as Tamzine opened the door.

'Oh, Tammy, what have you decided?'

'Are we going, Tam-o'-Shanter?' cried Rosalie.

‘Going where?’ Robin looked up from the home letter she was reading. ‘What’s the matter with them Tamzine? They’re off their heads with excitement.’

‘You’ll know soon enough, and you won’t approve,’ Tamzine’s tone was grim as she ushered the younger girls into her own room.

‘Are you coming, all three of you?’ Rosalie demanded, her eyes round with eagerness. ‘When? Can we go to-night?’

‘I bought a huge packet of motoring chocolate, with nuts and raisins in it. We’ll have a midnight picnic,’ Daffodil said gleefully. ‘Gail told me not to make myself ill, and I said I had strenuous work before me and I should need it to sustain me. She doesn’t know I meant a secret visit to the Squirrel House!’

‘Stop talking, and listen to Tamzine. She’s the leader of the party,’ Rhoda said. ‘If we let you two come, you must do what the Captain says.’

‘Righto!’ Daffodil’s tone told of perfect bliss. ‘Carry on, Captain! I thought Rhoda would be Captain.’

‘Rhoda doesn’t—she doesn’t want to be Captain,’ Tamzine changed her sentence hastily, as Rhoda glared at her. ‘If you’ll listen, I’ll tell you what we’ve planned.’

‘Rhoda doesn’t like the business,’ Daffodil thought shrewdly. ‘But she won’t stay behind. She’s a brick to go, if she feels bad about it.’

The juniors approved the plan and promised to be ready, in their working smocks and armed with torches, when the Captain came to their door.

‘We’ll have to square Robin and Gwyneth somehow,’ Rosalie said.

‘They can’t do anything. They’d never give us away.’

‘You’d better go and start on the good work,’ Tamzine suggested.

‘No, we won’t say anything till bedtime. They might be tempted to do something about it. We’d better keep away from them, or they’ll guess there’s something up. Come out to the garden, Rosalie love!’ and Daffodil dashed away, to discuss the plans under a big copper beech.

‘Rhoda feels it isn’t quite playing the game,’ Rosalie said.

‘I thought she didn’t like it. Is that what Tamzine was going to say?’

‘I shouldn’t wonder. It was something Rhoda didn’t want us to know. Didn’t you see her face?’

‘I saw how she looked, but I didn’t quite catch on. I should have thought she’d want us to know she disapproved.’

‘Not when she’s going to do it.’ Rosalie understood her cousin better. ‘She feels it’s worse for her because she admits it’s wrong. Tam and Sonny don’t admit anything; they just want to go and that’s the end of it. But Rhoda feels she’s letting herself down by joining in, and she’d rather we didn’t know.’

‘Oh! It’s rotten for her. She won’t get much fun out of it.’

‘Don’t suppose she’ll get any. But she’ll stand by the other two.’

‘It’s jolly nice of her,’ was Daffodil’s verdict. ‘It must be awkward to feel like that.’

‘Jolly awkward to be so nearly grown-up! I’m glad I’m not!’ Rosalie exclaimed.

Daffodil laughed. ‘Don’t worry, my child. You won’t be grown-up for umpteen years yet. Rhoda’s only two years older than you, isn’t she?’

Rosalie looked grave. ‘That’s all, but Rhoda’s had troubles.’

Daffodil’s face grew sober too. ‘I know. I’m sorry. I suppose they’ve aged her. Couldn’t we help her to be young again?’

Rosalie's laugh rang out. 'We're doing our best! A good spree—and if we're caught, a good old row!—will give Rhoda something new to think about. Things are weighing on her; not only Geoff's death, but other family business. I can't tell you; she won't have it talked about. But she has heaps of things on her mind. She needs distracting! But we mustn't let those three get caught, Daffy! It would be too big a shock to them, and to everybody. It isn't like us; we aren't respectable, so it doesn't matter what we do. But Sonny and Tam, and Rhoda most of all, are pillars of society. They mustn't get into as big a row as this would mean.'

'We'll take care of them,' Daffodil promised. 'A row of that size would be too much of a distraction for Rhoda, do you think?'

'I think so,' Rosalie said seriously. 'We must protect her from any more troubles.'

CHAPTER 11. SQUARING ROBIN

Robin Brent stood by the window, staring out into the dark and nerving herself to a deed of real courage. She was shy, and she was still a very new girl. She was as old as the seniors in the Kingfisher room, but she was a new-comer, while they had belonged to the school for years. And they were three to one.

Daffodil and Rosalie sat on their beds and gazed at her. Then they looked at one another and raised their eyebrows.

Gwyneth took off her slide, and her black curls fell loosely about her face. 'Don't bother about the little wretches, Robin *fach*. If they choose to make asses of themselves, let them. We can't stop them.'

Daffodil hugged her knees. 'No, you can't, so why worry? We shall go, whatever you say.'

'It's sweet of you to be so bothered, Robin,' Rosalie's tone was coaxing. 'But we really are quite determined, so won't you get into bed and forget all about us?'

'I can't do that.' Robin said unhappily. 'You're going to do a silly thing, and you're only kids. Everyone will say we should have stopped you.'

'Oh I'm sure they won't! They're used to us already. They'll know you couldn't do anything!'

'What can you do, Robin?' Daffodil asked sympathetically. 'You couldn't fetch Lisabel—I mean Miss Durrant—to sit beside our beds, could you?'

Robin turned quickly. 'I believe I ought to tell somebody. Oh, don't be frightened! I shan't do it, because I know nobody else would think so, and I may be wrong. But it seems to me a silly idea that I must watch you juniors get into a dreadful row and say nothing, because it would be sneaking. You ought to be stopped. I've no right to stop you, so I can't do anything. There's just one thing I can do.'

She gathered up all her courage and marched across the room and opened the door. She was brave, when a duty faced her and could not be avoided, but this was costing her a real effort.

'What are you going to do?' Daffodil cried.

'Be quiet, idiot!' Gwyneth hissed. 'Do you want Miss Durrant to come?'

'She hasn't come up yet. What is Robin going to do?'

'Argue with your friends next door. Robin has pluck enough for six.'

'Oh, is that all? That won't do any good,' Daffodil laughed in relief. 'They're keener than we are!'

'That doesn't need any pluck, does it?' Rosalie wondered.

'Doesn't it? You don't know Robin!' Gwyneth retorted.

'If she feels as bad as that, you might have gone with her.'

'She doesn't want me. And it isn't my business. I'm not worrying about you little rotters. You can get into as many rows as you like.'

'Robin's likely to be a bit of a nuisance to us,' Rosalie observed. 'But I'd rather have her than you.'

'Indeed, yes!' Gwyneth agreed. 'Robin has more in her than most. Don't I know it!'

'What do you mean? Tell us, Gwyneth!'

‘Not I!’ said Gwyneth, and brushed her tangled hair.

Robin knocked on the door of the Kingfisher room, her heart beating wildly. She did not care for the task that seemed to her to be a duty.

‘Come in!’ Rhoda called. ‘Is it Daffodil? What’s up now?’

‘It isn’t Daffodil or Rosalie.’ Robin stood just inside the door, her cheeks as red as her dressing-gown, her brown eyes very wide and anxious, her brown plait hanging over her shoulder.

The Kingfisher girls stared at her. ‘Jolly pretty! I hadn’t realized it. Is it the red gown?’ Tamzine murmured.

‘Robin! Oh, do come in!’ Rhoda said hospitably. ‘How nice of you to call!’

Sonia pushed forward her own chair. ‘Do sit down! We are so pleased to see you!’

Robin’s colour deepened. ‘Please don’t be so welcoming! You won’t be glad to see me in a minute. I’ll not sit down, thanks; I mustn’t stay, of course. Are you really going to take Rosalie and Daffodil out into the garden instead of going to bed? They say they’re going out with you.’ Her eyes met Rhoda’s in appeal.

‘That’s the idea,’ Rhoda said curtly.

Robin gave her a quick look. ‘She doesn’t like it,’ she said to herself. ‘Perhaps I could do something with her.’

‘Why not, Robin?’ Tamzine argued. ‘What’s the harm? It’s a lovely night; it won’t hurt them.’

Robin turned to her indignantly. ‘I’m not silly! It’s against all rules. They’ve no right to go, and I don’t believe they’d do it on their own. You’re two years older; if you take them out, it’s very wrong of you.’

‘They want to come,’ said Sonia.

‘Not much taking needed,’ Tamzine laughed. ‘They’re only too keen. Don’t worry, Robin! Nothing will happen to them.’

‘It’s very nice of you to be upset, Robin,’ Rhoda said. ‘But I’m afraid there’s no help for it. We’ve decided to go.’

‘But what’s the idea?’ Robin cried. ‘Why are you going? What’s the sense in it?’

‘Now you’re asking!’ Tamzine drawled. ‘You can’t expect us to tell you all about it, when we know you aren’t exactly sympathetic. The babes had to tell you they were going, of course; but that’s all you need to know.’

‘It’s much better you shouldn’t know any more,’ Sonia remarked. ‘Then if anybody asks, you can say you didn’t know.’

Robin looked at them keenly. ‘I thought you were just going into the garden. Are you going somewhere else? Where *can* you go?’

‘My dear idiot, we don’t intend to tell you, so hadn’t you better go back to your own room?’ Tamzine demanded.

Sensitive colour swept into Robin’s face. ‘If nothing I can say will do any good, I’d better go. But I am very sorry you’re going to do it.’

‘That’s all right,’ Rhoda said. ‘And it was decent of you to come. But it isn’t any use, Robin.’

‘Can’t you do anything to stop them?’ Robin cried. ‘I don’t believe you want to go. Can’t you make them see how mad it is?’

Rhoda shook her head and set her lips firmly. ‘We’re all in it together. I couldn’t let the rest down.’

‘Of course you couldn’t,’ Tamzine exclaimed. ‘It’s a partnership. You don’t understand, Robin; we three always get into rows together.’

‘I understand quite enough,’ and Robin turned to the door.

‘Are you going to fetch Miss Durrant?’ Tamzine called after her.

Robin, scarlet, fled from the room.

‘Tam, you shouldn’t have said that!’ Sonia cried.

‘Tam, you brute!’ Rhoda remonstrated. ‘You know she wouldn’t do it!

‘I know. I shall have to apologize,’ Tamzine groaned. ‘It was caddish—and feeble! I was an ass. But I had to get rid of her somehow.’

‘I wish you hadn’t. It was sporting of her to come,’ Rhoda said. ‘I’d have hated doing it, in her place. I don’t think I’d have had the courage.’

‘She hated it; anyone could see that,’ Sonia agreed. ‘And then Tam went and made things worse.’

‘Oh, bother! I’ll say I’m sorry. Shall I go and get it over at once?’

‘No, leave her alone. Don’t make her put up with anything more to-night,’ Rhoda advised. ‘She’ll hate it, if you say much to her.’

‘I say, Tam!’ Sonia began. ‘Won’t we make an awful row going down the back stairs in boots, five of us?’

‘Dancing plims,’ Tamzine ordered. ‘We’ll send the kids back to change. We’ll creep down two at a time; I shall go first, to be sure my Daffodil doesn’t go off on her own or do anything mad.’

‘The whole thing’s mad. Robin was right about that,’ Rhoda said heavily. The weight on her spirits had been suddenly increased by Tamzine’s reference to dancing shoes.

‘What’s up now?’ Tamzine glanced at her uneasily. ‘You aren’t usually like this, old thing?’

‘Only what I told you before. You reminded me of Rosamund and her jolly class, and how decent she was to us. I feel an awful worm to be doing something underhand connected with her.’

‘Oh, bother! Rhoda Kane, bother you!’ Tamzine cried, almost furious, because she knew Rhoda was right. ‘Rosamund will never know. But if she does find out, we’ll tell her you tried to stop us. I promise that!’

‘Please don’t! It makes me seem so soft to be there at all, if that’s how I felt!’ Rhoda retorted. ‘It seems to me to make it worse.’

Tamzine shrugged her shoulders. ‘Better get to bed. We can’t go till after midnight.’

They prepared for bed in silence, and Sonia switched out the light.

On the stroke of midnight there came a tap on the door; it was opened a few inches, and Daffodil and Rosalie slipped into the Kingfisher room. They carried their gardening boots, but were wearing plimsolls, and Daffodil whispered: ‘We thought boots would make such a row, Tamzine! We can change outside, if you think it matters.’

‘No, we’ll go in plims. We’d thought of it; we were going to send you back to change. Leave your boots here. I’ll go first, with Rosalie; you and Rhoda will come in five minutes—not sooner. Sonny will follow in five minutes more. Not a sound, any of you! Not even a whisper, or we’re done.’

The Kingfisher girls had been preparing for some minutes, and all were ready, in their smocks and breeches and armed with torches. Tamzine’s whispered directions were carried out safely; with Rosalie at her heels, she crept down the servants’ staircase, which was close

to the Robin room, and along the back passage to the garden door. The girls used this all the time, on their way to open-air classes, so she had studied the lock carefully and opened the door without difficulty.

Rhoda and Daffodil followed, after the arranged interval, and in the shelter of the house they waited for Sonia. No one spoke; the juniors were breathless with excitement; Tamzine was not too happy, while Rhoda was very uneasy.

Sonia slipped out and joined them, closing the door softly and switching off her torch. She nodded to Tamzine. 'All safe, Captain. Not a sound.'

'Then lead the way, you two. The shortest route to the Squirrel House.'

'What did you people say to Robin *fach*, to upset her so badly?' Rosalie asked, in a cautious undertone, as the party skirted the lawn, keeping close to the bushes.

'Nothing much. Why? What did she say?'

'Didn't say anything, but she looked funny, and she jumped into bed and wouldn't speak to anybody, even Gwyneth. I believe she wanted to howl; she put her head under the quilt.'

'She did howl. I saw the quilt shake,' Daffodil said over her shoulder. 'Did you pigs rag her? She was a brick to be upset about us. Gwyneth wouldn't have bothered; she said so. You might have been decent to Robin! She's a jolly good sort.'

'You'd better not talk so much, or you'll miss the path,' Tamzine said irritably. 'We don't want to mess about in these bushes all night.'

'What did you call Robin, Rosalie?' Rhoda asked.

'Robin *fach*. That's what Gwyneth calls her. And she calls Gwyn *Gwyneth fach*. It means "little" or "dear." It's Welsh.'

'We guessed that,' Sonia murmured.

'We go in here,' Daffodil switched on her torch and turned down a narrow alley through the shrubbery. 'We'd better have a speck of light. But it's a good path; there aren't any roots or things to trip us up.'

'There! That's Gail's Corner, the tuck-shop.' Rosalie pointed to a dim shape, away to the right. 'We turn at the corner of the wall. And there's the Squirrel House!'

'Well guided, Daff!' Tamzine thrilled with the excitement of the moment and forgot everything in her exultation. 'We can't see much of it, certainly, but we can see it's there. Which window did you peep through, to see the loom? Cheer up, Son! You're going to see it in a few seconds!'

'Can't see much without lights,' Rosalie argued. 'Could we put on our torches, Captain?'

'Let's get inside, if we can,' Daffodil murmured. 'One tiny light is all that's safe out here. Somebody might wake and look out and see us.'

The cottage seemed asleep, however. The girls clustered round the door, and Tamzine tried the handle very gently.

'Locked! Only sensible, of course. What about the window?'

The lattice windows were ajar, and Daffodil, thrusting in a finger, unhooked the bar and pushed one wide. She put her knee on the low sill and Tamzine lifted her from behind. In a moment she was inside the room, silently opening the other two windows.

Rosalie slipped through one and joined her. Rhoda and Sonia, helped by Tamzine, followed with hardly a sound. Rhoda leaned out to give a hand to Tamzine from within, and all five girls stood triumphantly in the Squirrel House.

CHAPTER 12.

UNINVITED GUESTS

The loom stood there, a clumsy contrivance of strings and wooden bars; that was how it appeared to Sonia's eager but ignorant gaze. The girls crowded round, their torches all in use, and did not stop to look at anything else in the cottage kitchen in which they found themselves.

Beside the loom, folded neatly on a white cloth, lay a piece of glittering silver material. The end of it was still in the loom, stretched across in silver and white threads, with here and there a gleam of gold in the warp. As the finished part hung down to the floor, the gold shone palely through the silver in the torchlight.

The end of the piece, on which the weaver had been busy, had wonderful golden patterns, rings and stars and roses and lines, worked right across the material—a broad gold band for the hem of the dress. A white cloth was draped lightly over the whole, to protect it from dust, but Sonia lifted this with a gentle hand, and the girls stood gazing and marvelling.

In the room above them, Gail sat up in bed, listening. Had it really been a sound this time? The old cottage often creaked at night.

Was that a glow from the window of the room below? Fire? There was nothing to cause a fire. She crept to the window to look.

There was a light in the kitchen. She could see the faint smudge on the darkness of the bushes, where the windows were. And surely there was another sound? Could somebody be in the house?

She groped for torch and shoes, and wrapper. Rosamund's door was opposite her own, across the top step of the narrow stair.

Gail hesitated, then, with a very good guess as to what was happening, crept noiselessly down the steps.

'If it's a burglar, I'll back out and yell for Ros. But if it's girls, perhaps I could make them go away. She'd be fearfully wild. They'd get into the most awful row.'

'What a perfectly lovely thing!' Rhoda whispered, as she gazed at the gold and silver weaving. 'Is it for a dress? I wonder who is going to wear it?'

'It would make a glorious evening frock,' said Tamzine.

'Perhaps it's her own wedding-dress. It would fit that lovely ring,' Rosalie suggested.

Sonia said nothing but merely gazed, her heart's desire fulfilled—but only for a moment. 'How I'd love to work the thing!' she murmured. 'To sit there and make that beautiful stuff out of a few bits of thread—to create that lovely material and be the person who made it! How gorgeous it must be!'

'I wonder how she does it?' Tamzine said. 'I'd have liked to see her working, as you kids did.'

'She sits there, and she does this——' Rosalie began.

'Don't touch! 'Sonia said sharply. 'You don't know what harm you might do.'

'Well, she takes that funny thing with the gold thread on it, and passes it across through the silver ones, and somehow, I suppose, the pattern comes out.'

'Clever, aren't you?' Daffodil mocked.

‘Here’s a paper, with writing on it. I wonder if it’s directions for the pattern, like in a knitting or crochet book?’ Rhoda said, and picked up a sheet of paper from the small table close to the weaver’s chair.

The words written on it seemed to leap to meet her eyes, before she realized what they were.

‘DEAREST MAID,

‘Here is the stuff for your frock, for October. I hope it will help you to sing well, and that Queen’s Hall will like you——’

‘What do you mean by it?’ a furious voice whispered in the doorway. ‘What do you mean by coming here at night——’

‘Oh, stars!’ groaned Tamzine. ‘Now we’ve done it!’

The intruders turned to face Gail, Rhoda still holding the letter.

‘What do you mean?’ Gail hissed again, her face flaming with indignation. ‘Five of you, breaking into a house like burglars! I thought you were supposed to be an extra decent school—seniors who knew how to behave!’

‘I say, Gail!’ Rhoda began.

‘Don’t blow up!’ Tamzine exclaimed. ‘You’re a whole tornado, not just a gale!’

‘Go away at once, before I call somebody!’ Gail knew her failing and was struggling to keep her wild anger under control.

A hand fell on her shoulder. ‘All right, Gail. I’ll see to this.’

Rosamund’s tone was like ice and her face was stony. She stood behind Gail in the doorway and looked at the unhappy girls. In a blue kimono over a long white gown, she looked even taller than usual; her yellow hair hung in thick plaits on her shoulders. All the dignity, which Rhoda had dimly realized, was uppermost, and the girls shrank away.

‘We didn’t mean——’ Tamzine faltered.

Rosamund looked at her, but said nothing.

‘It was to please me,’ Sonia almost sobbed. ‘I wanted to see the loom! They came because of me; it’s not their fault. They came to back me up.’

‘You were reading my private letter?’ Rosamund looked stonily at Rhoda.

With a cry Rhoda flung the letter from her. ‘I didn’t know it was a letter! I wasn’t reading it! I thought it was your pattern—I’d only just picked it up—oh, you are horrible! As if I would! Oh, I hate you!’

‘I don’t exactly love any of you,’ Rosamund said grimly. ‘I want an explanation, please.’

‘We’ve told you,’ Sonia said brokenly. ‘They came because I wanted to see the loom.’

Rhoda, holding her head very high, faced Rosamund. ‘You said I was reading your letter. Please take that back.’

‘You were reading it.’

‘But I didn’t know. Don’t you believe me?’

‘Am I likely to believe anything, when I find you in my house at midnight, meddling with my things?’

‘We’ve done no harm!’ cried Rosalie.

‘We haven’t touched a single thing!’ Daffodil added.

Rhoda turned blindly away and pushed past Sonia towards the window. ‘It’s no use saying anything. She doesn’t mean to believe us. I *didn’t* know it was a letter!’

Tamzine put her arm round her. 'No, old thing, you didn't. You said perhaps it was a pattern, like in a crochet book. We know you didn't mean to read a letter. Why should you, anyway? But don't go away: we must stick together.'

Holding Rhoda's arm, she faced Rosamund steadily. 'We're very sorry. I apologize, for all of us. I was the one who planned it; Rhoda didn't want to come. We knew it was wrong.'

'But I was so fearfully keen to see your loom,' Sonia pleaded again. 'Miss Rosamund, is it so very awful? We haven't done any harm. Please don't look like that!'

Rosamund lit a little lamp that stood on a side table. 'Come into the other room. I still don't understand.'

Silently the girls followed her, Tamzine leading Rhoda, who would not look up. Gail closed the windows, which were rattling in the breeze, and came to the front room with the rest.

'We don't want to wake Aunt Elspeth, if we can help it,' she murmured; and dropping on a stool she watched and listened.

Rosamund placed the lamp on the table and stood beside it, and the glow lit up her stern face and yellow hair. The girls stood round the table in an uneasy half-circle.

'You know, this has been a shock to Gail and me,' Rosamund said slowly. 'We were asleep. We were wakened to find you in our house. We didn't expect this from your school.'

Tamzine bit her lip. 'We're very sorry indeed. It was a childish trick, and we oughtn't to have done it.'

'They came to back me up,' Sonia urged. 'They wouldn't let me come alone; and we couldn't find the way without Daffodil and Rosalie.' She stopped suddenly.

'Why? I don't understand,' Rosamund said again.

She sat down by the table and rested her elbow upon it and her cheek in her hand. 'Sit down. There are plenty of chairs. Why did you come?'

Rhoda, worn out and angry, dropped into a chair and flung her arms across the table and buried her head on them. Tamzine put her arm round her shoulders and stood with Sonia, facing Rosamund. The younger girls drew up chairs and threw themselves into them, but their eyes were roving about the room in the lamplight. There were fine photographs on the walls, in brown frames—photos of children, of ruins, of gardens; it was a pretty room, with small tables and basket chairs, and flowers in jars and vases, and was evidently used as a tea-room in wet or cold weather.

'We came to see your loom,' Tamzine explained, meeting Rosamund's eyes steadily. 'Sonny was wild to see it. Any handicraft stunt appeals to her.'

'But how did you know? I didn't tell you about the loom. And why didn't you ask if you might see it?'

There was a pause, and Tamzine looked uncomfortable.

'I'd heard about it,' said Sonia. 'I couldn't ask you, because——' she paused too.

Rhoda looked up. 'Rosalie!' she said sharply.

'Yes, I know; it's our turn to explain,' Rosalie said reluctantly. 'Please, Rosamund, we're very sorry, but Daffodil and I looked in at your window one day, and we saw you weaving.'

'We told the others, and Sonny Raymond's been crazy about it ever since,' Daffodil went on. 'We were out of bounds, of course, so she couldn't ask you about it, because that would have been giving us away.'

'And we had to show them the path,' Rosalie added.

Rosamund's eyes searched their faces keenly. 'That was all, really all? It was only to look at the loom that you came?'

'Why, what else could we come for?' Tamzine exclaimed.

'You haven't any guilty secret, have you?' Rosalie bubbled over with amusement. 'Did you think we were being detectives?'

'Is there anything hidden in your house?' Daffodil cried. 'That would be a gorgeous thrill! May we look for it?'

'Idiots!' said Sonia. 'Rosamund, honestly we only came to see the loom, and the rest all came because I was so keen. Won't you forgive us? We didn't touch anything.'

Rosamund had flushed unaccountably at the exclamations of the juniors. She said quickly: 'You had no right to do it, you know; not at night, in secret. If you younger girls had owned up, I'd have shown you the loom with pleasure. As it is, I'm afraid you must go away at once. It's one o'clock.'

'We apologize. We're very sorry,' Sonia said again.

'We'd like to feel it's all right—or, at least, that you don't loathe us too much,' Tamzine urged.

Rosamund laughed, in spite of herself. And at that Gail slipped away into the back kitchen and was busy over the oil stove for a few minutes.

'I don't loathe you at all, now that I understand it was just childish curiosity. But it was a lower-school trick, and you're supposed to be seniors. I'm still a little surprised,' Rosamund remarked.

'I say, you are brutal!' Tamzine remonstrated, while Sonia reddened but laughed ashamedly. 'We know all that; we knew it all the time. But we don't like hearing you say it.'

'What will you do about it?' Daffodil asked anxiously. 'Will you report us to Miss Rainey?'

Rosamund looked at her. 'I shan't do anything. But I shall be interested to hear what you do.'

'Oh!' The girls stared back at her. Rhoda raised her head and stared too.

'You mean we ought to report ourselves in the morning?' Tamzine began doubtfully.

'Do you really think we must?' Sonia wailed. 'There'll be an awful row! And we haven't done any harm.'

Tamzine stood looking down at the table, with pinched lips and knitted brows. 'I suppose it would be the decent thing to do,' she admitted at last. 'I hadn't thought there was any need; seems to me it's for you to say. If you think we ought to do it, I guess we'll have to. Are you game, you others?'

'You're the Captain of the expedition,' Rosalie said loyally. 'We'll stick by you, Tam.'

'But there'll be an awful shindy,' Daffodil urged. 'I don't see any need!'

'It isn't for us to choose,' Tamzine said. 'We're here in Rosamund's house without leave, at midnight. It's for her to say.'

'You'd feel better if you owned up,' Rosamund suggested.

Sonia looked up. 'Tam, we three could go to Miss Rainey. There's no need to say anything about these two. Robin won't give them away. People will think it was only our room——'

'As if we would!' Rosalie cried. 'Sonny Raymond, as if we would!'

'There'll be a thundering row,' Daffodil grumbled. 'I don't see why we need all be plunged into it.'

'You wouldn't,' Tamzine said scathingly. 'I'm glad Rosalie sees it. But we won't drag you to Rain against your will. It will be enough if we three go, won't it?' she appealed to Rosamund.

'I shall go with you! I won't be left out of the scandal!' Rosalie said.

'We'll go to Miss Rainey in the morning,' Tamzine promised. 'That's what you want us to do, isn't it?'

Rosamund sat up, leaning back in her chair and looking at them. 'I'm glad to know you're willing. But I don't want you to do it. I don't want to get you into trouble. Can you get into the house again without being discovered, do you suppose?'

The girls stared at her, wide-eyed and unbelieving.

'We hope so. We meant to try,' Sonia began.

'Do you mean——?' Tamzine asked doubtfully.

'What I would really like you to do,' Rosamund said, and the girls unconsciously pressed a little nearer in their eagerness—'would be to give me your solemn promise that in future you'll behave like the seniors Miss Rainey supposes you to be, and have no more of this lower-school silliness. She trusts you; show her you can be trusted. Give me your promise there'll be no more of this sort of thing. Then, if you can, slip back into the house and say no more about it. But behave like decent people in future.'

'Oh, you are a brick! How gorgeous of you!' the words burst from Sonia and Tamzine.

'Oh, you sport!' cried Rosalie.

'I was scared stiff,' said Daffodil.

'We were all scared stiff,' Tamzine owned. 'I can hardly believe we haven't to face that ghastly interview in the morning. Are you *sure* it will be all right? Do you really mean it?'

'Some day I'll invite you to come and watch when I'm weaving,' Rosamund promised. 'But I'd like to finish the bit of work I have in the loom. It's rather a special dress-piece; I don't want anything to happen to it. I'm just at the end of it.'

'It's a lovely thing,' Sonia said wistfully. 'Is it for your wedding-dress?'

Rosamund gave her a startled look. 'How did you know? Oh, you saw my ring! No, it's an evening frock for my greatest chum. She is to sing for the first time at the Queen's Hall in October, and she's a little shy about it; it's rather an ordeal. I hope my frock will give her courage.'

'It will make a gorgeous dress for a platform!' Tamzine said enthusiastically. 'It will glitter when she moves; it's shot with gold, isn't it? Is she fair, like you?'

'No, my child; she's half Italian and very dark.'

'Oh, she'll look a picture in it!'

'I think so. Now—yes, Gail, what is it?'

'The kettle's boiling. Oughtn't they to have cocoa or something? It's the middle of the night!'

'Oh, you duck!' cried Rosalie. 'Oh, tophole!'

'A midnight feast, after all!' Daffodil murmured, enraptured.

The older girls looked at Rosamund.

'We ought not to give it to you,' she said. 'It's a kind idea, Gail Ann, but they aren't invited guests. They're very bad girls.'

'But they might catch cold,' Gail insinuated. 'That would be a great pity, so early in the term!'

The culprits collapsed in a shout of laughter. 'Oh, what an excuse! Do we look cold?'

‘I feel all hot and bothered!’ Tamzine added.

Rosamund struggled to look stern. Then she gave in and broke into a laugh. ‘Oh, Abby Gail, how could you? How can I be proper and severe, with you in the background talking such nonsense?’

‘Well, I’m cold, if you aren’t,’ Gail urged. ‘My pyjamas feel chilly. We can’t have hot drinks without offering them to our visitors, invited or not.’

‘No, but we could have waited till they had gone,’ Rosamund retorted. ‘You’re only a schoolgirl yourself. Hurry up and make cocoa, then, and I’ll find some biscuits.’

Gail vanished, with a grin at the radiant girls.

‘It’s awfully sporting of you to treat us! You’re making us sorrier every minute,’ Sonia exclaimed.

‘Well, don’t do it again.’ Rosamund turned to look at Rhoda, who had not spoken to her during the whole interview.

‘Won’t you forgive me? I was taken by surprise, and you were holding my letter to Maidlin. I’m sorry I spoke hastily, but I was stunned by the sight of you all.’

Rhoda reddened in embarrassment. ‘I didn’t know it was a letter. I honestly thought it was a weaving pattern.’

‘I see how it happened. Come, Rhoda Kane! Your friends said they were sorry and I forgave them. Now I’m telling you I’m sorry. What about it?’

‘It’s all right,’ Rhoda struggled to smile. ‘But you gave me a ghastly shock.’

‘My dear girl, think of the shock I had!’

‘We oughtn’t to have come,’ Rhoda admitted.

‘Rhoda didn’t want to come,’ Tamzine said. ‘But she wouldn’t let us come without her.’

Rhoda looked at Rosamund. ‘What would you have done? I hated it. But how could I stay behind? I had to back them up.’

‘You oughtn’t to have come. You should have shown your disapproval by keeping out of it,’ Rosamund said promptly. ‘But I admit that it would have been very difficult,’ she added. ‘I’m glad to know that at least one of you didn’t want to come.’

She brought a tin of biscuits from a cupboard, as Gail came in with the laden tray. ‘Sit down, all of you. This is Abby Gail’s feast, so she shall wait on you.’

Gail laughed. She had tucked up her dressing-gown so that she should not trip.

‘Ros, it’s awfully hard on your Aunt Elspeth to be left out of all the fun,’ she said. ‘Think how bad she’ll feel to-morrow!’

‘Oh, but an aunt would be horribly shocked!’ Tamzine exclaimed, as she took her cup of cocoa.

‘Both at the feast and at our being here at all,’ Sonia added.

Gail’s laugh rang out again. ‘They’re convinced your aunt is at least fifty!’

‘You needn’t make such a row. You’ll wake her!’ Rosalie cried.

‘She’s awake. I heard her moving. She’ll be here in about two seconds,’ said Gail.

‘This is a night out!’ Rosamund groaned. Then, at the dismay in the faces of her guests, she too broke into laughter. ‘Don’t you think you’d better leave your cocoa and go, before my terrifying aunt appears?’

CHAPTER 13. LISABEL'S FAULT

'What are you doing, Rosamund?' a shy voice spoke from the doorway.

'Giving an early morning party. Why didn't you stay in bed, like a good old auntie?'

The schoolgirls turned, startled by the voice which had spoken out of the darkness. It had not sounded like that of an elderly aunt.

Holding a candle, whose light shone on her wavy yellow hair, stood a girl of nineteen, in a lilac kimono over pale green pyjamas. Her puzzled eyes took in the details of the scene. '*Rosamund!*' she cried, dismay and accusation in her voice.

The faces of the girls, as they stared at her, were as puzzled as her own.

'Who——?' Sonia began.

'It's all right, Elspeth, my dear; I didn't invite them. They're bad children, and they just came. I'm sending them home, but Abby Gail said they must have hot drinks because *she* was catching cold.'

Gail gave her peal of laughter again. 'Introduce your aunt, Rosamund! Everybody's stunned.'

'My aunt, Miss Abbott,' Rosamund explained.

The yellow-haired girl broke into a shy smile. 'I'm pleased to meet you, but I'm sure you oughtn't to be here.'

'We ought not, and that's a fact,' Tamzine agreed. 'We're just going back to bed. Rosamund has been a perfect brick; she's forgiven us. But, I say——'

'Are you really her aunt?' The question broke irrepressibly from Daffodil. 'Oh, what a joke! We thought you were sure to be old!'

'How do you manage it?' Rosalie pleaded. 'You aren't much older than Rhoda and Tamzine and Sonny! Isn't Rosamund a very large niece for you to have?'

The aunt laughed shyly. 'She only calls me auntie to tease. I'm Elspeth. But my sister married her father, so I really am her aunt, by marriage.'

'Oh! Have some cocoa!' cried Tamzine. 'You haven't much more than left school yourself, have you? I'm sure you can still enjoy a midnight feast!'

Gail had brought another steaming cup. 'Sorry we woke you! We tried to be quiet, but there are so many of us.'

'Oh, thank you, Abby Gail! But why did they come?'

'We'll tell you all about it, later. At the moment they're going, and quickly too,' said Rosamund. 'Hurry up, people!'

'But you wouldn't like us to burn our mouths!' said Daffodil.

Gail handed round the biscuits and sat down to take her own cocoa. 'Time I had my hot drink!'

Elspeth looked at the company; the girls in their morning smocks; Rosamund's thick plaits hanging on each side of her face and past her waist, and her long blue gown; Gail's shock of rumpled brown hair and her green dressing-gown; and she laughed. 'The Rose House has had several parties in it, but this is one of the funniest!'

'It isn't the Squirrel House, you know,' Gail looked at Tamzine. 'That's next door, where Aunt Elspeth was asleep. This is Rosamund's cottage, the Rose House. They're under one

roof, and together they're called the Rose and Squirrel. Rosamund and I live in the Rose House——'

'Rosamund Kane, what do you mean by this?' An angry voice interrupted her, from the doorway of the Rose kitchen.

'Oh, my hat! Now we've done it!' Rosamund sprang to her feet in dismay. 'Lisabel, go back to bed! What are you doing here?'

'That's the question I've come to ask.' Lisabel's tone was grim as she stood in the doorway, her flaming hair uncovered and glowing red in the lamplight. She, too, wore her working smock; her eyes were fixed on the girls, accusing and incredulous. 'Please explain this—this scandalous scene!'

'Oh, rot, Lisabel! You aren't really part of the school!' Rosamund remonstrated. 'You aren't a proper mistress! Be a sport!'

'Mistress or not, I've been trusted by Miss Rainey,' Lisabel retorted. 'I saw the girls cross the lawn, so I came after them as soon as I'd dressed, though it's taken me some time to find them. I didn't think you'd do this, Rosamund Kane. Did you invite them?'

'*What did you call her?*' Rhoda sprang forward, a sharp bewildered note in her voice.

'She said—"Rosamund Kane." That's our name,' Rosalie gasped.

'Oh, good *night!*' Rosamund groaned. 'Now you've done it, idiot! Lisabel Durrant, didn't I ask you——'

'What did she mean?' Rhoda was white. Holding her head very high she faced Rosamund. 'Please answer me! What did she mean?'

'Sorry! I forgot,' Lisabel said curtly, and bit her lips in annoyance. 'I'm very sorry, Rosamund.'

'The mischief's done now.' Rosamund was white too, as she turned to Rhoda. 'I'm sorry you should find out like this. It's bound to be a shock. I meant to tell you gently. I'm your cousin, Rosamund Kane. My brother Roderick is the baby heir you object to so much. He can't help it, poor mite!'

'You—you're that horrible girl? You?' Rhoda's hand reached for a chair to steady herself.

Tamzine put an arm round her. 'Steady, old girl. Don't collapse!'

'You're our cousin?' Rosalie cried. 'The one who's going to marry Uncle Geoffrey?'

Tamzine looked quickly at Rosamund, who was watching Rhoda anxiously. 'Are you the one who's going to be the new Countess?'

'Unfortunately, yes,' Rosamund said, her eyes noting every change in Rhoda's strained face. 'I didn't want the title, but I do want Geoffrey.'

'Gosh!' said Tamzine. 'How well you'll do it!'

Rhoda gave a cry. 'You've cheated us! You had no right to hide it, and come and make friends, when we didn't understand! You let us think you were Miss Abbott——'

'Pardon me!' Rosamund spoke with the dignity she could assume when she needed it. 'You took it for granted I was called Abbott; I've told you that I am not. I haven't cheated you; I haven't hidden anything. But I was very anxious to make friends before you found out who I was. I hoped you would perhaps judge me more kindly if you had some idea what I was like. You have been prejudiced against me, and you have refused to see me. You've made no effort to find out what I was really like. When chance sent you here, to my very door—it was sheer chance; nobody arranged it—I hoped we might make friends. I knew you wouldn't give me a fair show if you knew who I was. If anyone has been unfair, it has been you and your mother, who refused to meet me. I'm very anxious to be friends. I can't come into your family

quite happily, knowing that you resent my existence so bitterly. Rhoda, couldn't you think of me just as Rosamund and like me a little? You did like Rosamund, you know!

'Not if you're that horrible girl,' Rhoda panted. 'Let me go, Tam!'

She tore herself from Tamzine's arm and rushed to the door.

'Stop her, Lisabel!' Rosamund cried.

But Lisabel, taken by surprise, had been thrust aside, and Rhoda had dashed out into the darkness.

Rosalie rushed after her. 'I'll see that she's all right. I'm sorry. I say! I don't feel like she does, you know!' she called, as she ran.

Daffodil, with a breathless—'Rosalie! Tell me! I don't understand a scrap!'—sped after her friend.

'Let them go,' Rosamund said unsteadily. Her voice broke, and she stood with bent head by the table. The lamplight shone on her quivering face and tightly-pressed lips, and she turned from it, so that her face was in shadow.

For a long moment there was silence in the big room of the Rose House. Elspeth's lips were trembling; Gail looked very serious. Lisabel's face was set and hard, as she looked at the schoolgirls. She was desperately sorry for the mischief she had done, but the blame, to her mind, lay with the girls who had broken bounds.

Rosamund gave a tired sigh, and looked at Tamzine and Sonia. 'Help Rhoda, if you can. You two are fond of her. I want to be friends, but they all hate me. It isn't fair. I had such hopes of something better, when I heard Rhoda Kane was in the school. And she would have liked me, if I'd been anyone else. Could you make her see it?'

'We'll try,' Sonia whispered.

'I'll do everything I can, Miss Kane,' Tamzine said eagerly. 'Please tell us! Does Miss Rainey know you're Rhoda's cousin?'

'She didn't know at first. The Squirrel House belongs to Elspeth and her married sister, and Miss Rainey took it for granted I was another Miss Abbott. When I heard Rhoda mentioned—she told her name to Gail in the tuck-shop, and Gail told me and asked if she could be my cousin—I told Miss Rainey who I was. She said Rhoda was being foolish in her attitude and there was no need to say anything to her. She hasn't any sympathy with Rhoda.'

'She was very careful not to give you any name but "Miss Rosamund,"' Sonia said.

'I asked her to do that. I wanted to tell Rhoda in my own way and at the time that seemed best. She'll think I have tricked her, but I never meant it that way. After all, I've only seen her once! I couldn't call her out before the dancing-class and say: "I'm your cousin. Would you prefer not to learn 'Sage Leaf' from me?" could I?'

'Rather not!' Tamzine agreed. 'We don't feel you've cheated her. That's all rot, and we'll tell her so, Miss Kane. But——'

'Need you be so unfriendly? You were willing to call me Rosamund a few minutes ago.'

'Oh, but we didn't know! You seem too important a person now,' Tamzine stumbled in her explanation.

'She isn't a Countess yet,' Gail said. 'You needn't be scared of her.'

'She's only my rather large niece, until she's married to the Earl.' Elspeth gave Rosamund a tremulous smile.

'Do please be friendly still! And do anything you can to help Rhoda. I want them to like me, before I'm married,' Rosamund said again.

Lisabel came from the doorway. ‘Rosamund, you asked me not to tell Rhoda. I’m fearfully sorry I was so careless. But I must take these girls back to bed. They ought not to be here.’

Rosamund turned to her quickly, tossing back her long plaits. ‘Yes, but I’ve something to say first! I didn’t bring them here. You implied that I’d invited them. Why should I? Do you think I’m crazy?’

‘If she’d invited them, she’d have dressed properly to receive them,’ Gail remarked. ‘At least, she’d have done her hair—though I must say she looks like a Middle Ages queen with it hanging down!’

‘Hear, hear!’ said Tamzine.

‘Gail Ann, you’d better skip off to bed,’ Rosamund exclaimed, her colour rising.

‘Aunt Elspeth and I must wash these cups before we go.’

‘The cups can wait till the morning. Off you go! Elspeth, I wish you’d go, too. Be a dear kind auntie and set the child a good example!’

Elspeth sighed and laughed, and rose. ‘Come along, Abby Gail! I always have to do as she asks, when she calls me a dear kind auntie!’

‘Miss Durrant, we’re very sorry. It was all our fault,’ Tamzine began, as Gail and the youthful aunt disappeared. ‘Nobody invited us. We’d heard about the loom in the other room, and we wanted to look at it. We came without leave; it was an awful thing to do, of course. Rhoda didn’t want to come; she did her best to stop us. Gail found us, and then Rosamund came down. But she’d forgiven us, and we had promised to go back and never do anything of the sort again. She was marvellous about it, and very sporting. We were just going when Gail suggested cocoa, to warm us all up.’

‘It wasn’t really a midnight supper, though it must have looked awfully like it, when you came in,’ Sonia pleaded.

‘Do you still think I had planned this, Lisabel?’ Rosamund demanded.

‘She’ll be a gorgeous Countess!’ Tamzine murmured.

‘No, I don’t suppose you did. I’m sorry; shall I grovel? I was an ass to think it,’ Lisabel said.

‘You were; an absolute ass. I don’t want you to row the girls. We’ve had all that out and decided to say no more about it. If you hadn’t come, they’d have been quietly in bed by this time. Can’t you look the other way while they slip past you?’

‘Oh, you are decent!’ Tamzine cried.

Lisabel looked at the girls. ‘But ought I to do that? I’m sorry I caught them, but since I have found out—after all, I am supposed to be——’

‘You’re only a temporary lady,’ Rosamund said ruthlessly. ‘You owe me something for the way you’ve messed up my affairs. If Miss Rainey ever hears, I shall tell her the whole story and say I insisted you shouldn’t get the girls into trouble. Don’t you see, Liza, that it isn’t going to help me with Rhoda and Rosalie, if there’s a school row over this? Things are quite bad enough without that—thanks to you.’

‘Oh, very well!’ Lisabel shrugged her shoulders. ‘I don’t want to cause a row! If you take the responsibility——!’

‘Certainly!’ Rosamund retorted. ‘Send any wrathful inquirers to me. Good night, you two! Say a good word to Rhoda for me, when you can.’

‘Oh, we will!’ Tamzine and Sonia spoke together.

‘Rosalie doesn’t feel so bad,’ Tamzine added. ‘But she’ll stand up for Rhoda.’

‘It’s because Rhoda cares so much that I care,’ Rosamund said wearily. ‘Good night!’

Lisabel stood aside to let the girls pass; they went out silently, and she followed.

As they crossed the kitchen, Sonia glanced at the loom and its glittering dress-length. But Tamzine's eyes went back to the room where the lamp still burned on the table. In its light she saw Rosamund drop exhausted into a chair and rest her head on her outspread arms, her shoulders and yellow plaits heaving as she sighed in utter dejection.

Tamzine ran after Sonia with quivering lips. 'She's going to weep, now that she's got rid of us! Oh, Sonny, we must help her somehow! But what a lovely Countess she will be! Can't you just see her being presented at Court on her marriage, wearing the family jewels?'

'I love her,' Sonia said. 'I want to help. Think of some way, Tam! She and Rhoda must be friends. They're both too jolly to be enemies for ever.'

'Rosamund isn't an enemy. It's only poor old Rhoda. She'll be feeling fearfully bad. We'll try to help, Son.'

CHAPTER 14.

ROBIN ASKS QUESTIONS

Lisabel said nothing to the girls as she followed them across the lawn. She was regretting bitterly her careless use of Rosamund's name, and her annoyance with herself was shown in her grimly reproachful manner to them.

Tamzine drew close to Sonia and spoke in an undertone. 'Now we know why Rosamund was so much upset at finding us in her house! I couldn't think what she meant.'

'I don't understand,' Sonia whispered, with a glance over her shoulder at Lisabel Durrant. 'When she found us, do you mean?'

'Rather! And when she was relieved to find we'd only come to see the loom. She thought Rhoda had guessed who she was, and had come, on the quiet, to try to find out.'

'Oh! Yes, I see,' Sonia agreed. 'That explains it. That was the "secret" Rosalie and Daffodil asked her about. They were right, after all.'

'She looked guilty when they said it,' Tamzine said thoughtfully. 'They'd hit on the truth. And she'd seen Rhoda holding her letter! Poor old Rho, it did look bad!'

'Awful! You couldn't blame Rosamund if she thought the worst. It was very hard on Rhoda.'

'Hard on them both! I wonder where Rho has gone? And the other two, of course,' Tamzine added.

'I think Rhoda would crawl back to bed. She'd had a terrible shock,' Sonia said.

'And she'd want to hide till she got used to the idea. I'm afraid she'll feel terribly bad.'

As they reached the house, Daffodil slipped out of the shadows. 'Rosalie and Rhoda have gone in,' she whispered. 'I waited to tell you. What's Miss Durrant going to do?'

'She won't report us. Rosamund made her promise. Creep up to bed before she comes,' Tamzine advised, in a cautious undertone. 'And just remember, Till Owlglass, that none of this mess would have happened, but for you. You were the silly ass who put it into Sonny's head.'

Daffodil made a grimace at her. 'You and Sonny don't need to be soft. You needn't have come,' she jeered, and opened the door without a sound.

As she disappeared, Lisabel came striding up. 'Was that one of the others? Are they all here?'

'Yes, Miss Durrant, it was Daffodil. She'd waited to tell us the others had gone up to bed.'

'Follow her as quietly as you can. Come to me in the morning; you can't expect me to overlook this entirely, though I shall not report you to Miss Rainey. You will not talk in your bedroom. It is two o'clock, remember.'

'Miss Durrant, we can't promise not to speak to Rhoda!' Tamzine remonstrated. 'She may be in an awful state. If she's upset, we can't leave her and do nothing.'

Lisabel paused. 'Well, don't talk to her if you can help it. It will be better for her to rest. I don't suppose you can say much that will help her. Go up quickly now—but be very quiet.'

The girls crept to their room. The house was silent and asleep, and the Robin door was shut.

'I wonder if Robin has been lying awake?' Tamzine closed the door of the Kingfisher room without a sound.

Sonia did not care about Robin. She switched on the light and looked for Rhoda.

A hump under the bedclothes was all that she could see. Rhoda's smock was flung on her chair, her shoes and breeches lay on the floor. She had jumped into bed and buried her head in the pillow.

The other two looked at one another and then began to prepare for bed. But Tamzine kept one eye on Rhoda's figure and presently saw that the lump under the quilt was shaking.

She went and sat on the side of the bed. 'Rhoda, old girl, don't take it so hardly! Your cousin is a dear. She won't let Miss Durrant report us; she says she'll take the responsibility.'

Rhoda shook off her hand angrily, but did not speak.

'She's awfully jolly, Rhoda,' Sonia whispered wistfully. 'We want to like her. Couldn't you be friends?'

'We do like her,' Tamzine's voice was firm. 'I like her extremely. She's a jolly nice person, and she can't help it if she's your cousin. As for marrying the Earl, he's very sensible; he couldn't have anybody more suitable. She's pretty—no, handsome! That's a better word; it's more than pretty. She's very good-looking, and she can be stately enough for a Queen. She'll be a perfect Countess. You said yourself she was dignified, and—my hat!—it was true!'

She moved away, for Rhoda was quivering dangerously under her hand and words. But as she went to put out the light Tamzine paused by the bed again.

'Rhoda, old thing! We left your cousin in tears because you won't be friends. She didn't break down while we were there, of course; but I looked back and I know she was weeping. Are you quite sure you're worth it?'

And Tamzine switched off the light and lay down in bed.

Rhoda was heavy-eyed and silent next morning, even after the extra hour in bed allowed on Sundays. The others did not tease her; they talked together, but they were sleepy too, and had not much to say.

'I must go and beg Robin's pardon,' Tamzine groaned. 'And then we'd better go and see Lisabel.'

'You'll call her that to her face, and she won't take it well,' Sonia observed. 'I don't see why she should row us, when Rosamund said it was all right.'

'You forget Lisabel's hair,' Tamzine retorted. 'Didn't I say she had a temper? It blazed up last night, and she may not have calmed down yet.'

'It may have died down as quickly as it flared up,' Sonia said hopefully.

'I shall tackle Robin first. I feel worst about her,' and Tamzine strode off to the Robin room.

'Robin Brent, please forgive me. I apologize abjectly. I made an ass of myself last night, but I didn't mean what I said,' she spoke with her head stuck in at the half-open door.

Robin looked up, embarrassed and shy. 'Oh, please! I know you didn't mean anything. I didn't mind——'

'Oh, Robin *fach!* You minded very much—well, yes, indeed, you did,' said Gwyneth.

'Of course you minded. I was very rude and unkind. But I'm so very sorry now that you will forgive me, won't you, Robin *fach?*' Tamzine coaxed.

Robin laughed. 'I'll never think of it again, Tammy. Who told you to call me that? What do you suppose it means?'

'Daffodil told me. I know what it means. Aren't the babes awake yet?' She looked at Daffodil's bed. 'Oh, she's not there! Have they gone out? Weren't they sleepy?'

'I don't know if they went to sleep at all. They're very full of something. What did you do last night?'

‘Went to call on Rosamund. We didn’t mean to see her, but Gail heard us, and then Rosamund came down.’ Tamzine came into the room and closed the door.

‘At midnight?’ Robin and Gwyneth stared at her.

Tamzine explained. ‘Rosamund has a loom, for hand-weaving, and Sonny Raymond was crazy to see it. Rosalie and Daffodil had found the path, and they came to show us the way. Rhoda didn’t want to go, but she went to back up Sonny and me. I went because I’m an ass and I wanted the fun. But we had more fun than we expected. Miss Durrant heard us and came after us, and we’re to go to her this morning. Wish us joy of the interview!’

‘Tamzine, what a mad thing to do!’ Robin exclaimed. ‘Will she report you to the Head?’

‘No, not as bad as that. Rosamund begged us off. So far as she’s concerned, it’s all right; we said we were sorry and she said: “Righto!” She’s an angel. But Miss Durrant is still fierce about it, so we’d better go and know the worst. See you later, if she leaves any remains worth considering!’

Lisabel’s anger was quick to rise but quick to go. She had had a thwarted, difficult girlhood, but love and happiness had brought her not only a ruby ring but a quieter and more balanced mind. Her old self had blazed up at the discovery of the girls’ indiscretion; but all night she had been putting herself in their place and trying to see their point of view. She wished heartily that she had taken the way of escape Rosamund had offered, and had been content to say no more about the escapade; but having told them to come she could not send them away again.

She spoke more quietly than they had expected, and her eyes rested anxiously on Rhoda, who was white and silent and would not meet her look.

‘I’m sorry about last night, girls, but it isn’t possible for me to overlook it entirely. I’m supposed to be in charge of the rooms on my corridor; Miss Rainey would feel I was to blame, if she heard of your doings. I shall not report you, as that was Rosamund’s wish. But none of you will go to the tuck-shop for three days—that is, until Thursday, as the shop is not open to you to-day.’

Rhoda shrugged her shoulders very slightly. She had no intention of ever going near the tuck-shop again. Lisabel saw, and understood.

Tamzine and Sonia looked blank, however. They had been hoping for a thrilling talk with Gail.

‘Oh, Miss Durrant! Must you—must we——?’

‘I’m afraid I must, and you must,’ Lisabel said firmly. ‘You’ve had your fun, girls; you must pay for it. You knew you were doing wrong.’

‘Oh, yes!’ Tamzine groaned. ‘The kids too, I suppose?’

‘Rosalie and Daffodil? Oh, certainly! I’m sure they were quite as much to blame as you. Tell them what I’ve said.’

‘They’ll howl with rage,’ Tamzine said sadly.

‘You know we want to go and talk to Gail more than anything else in the world, don’t you, Miss Durrant?’

Lisabel laughed. ‘You can wait a few days. If Sonia had had a little patience, none of this would have happened.’ She looked anxiously at Rhoda, and then at the other two.

Tamzine shook her head helplessly. She had tried more than once to make Rhoda talk, but had been met by stony silence every time.

Lisabel looked grave and dismissed them, feeling quite unfitted to tackle so big a problem. She hoped vaguely that Rhoda would ‘get over it’ in a few days, if left to herself.

‘If the silly child goes on looking like that, the Head will soon be down on her,’ she said to herself. ‘I don’t know how to talk to her!’

She went to the Rose and Squirrel Houses later in the day, but found that Rosamund had gone. She had telephoned from the village to ask that a car should be sent for her, and was now at Verriton House, where her little stepbrother was being cared for by his staff of nurses.

On Sunday afternoon, as the girls lounged about the garden, Robin came up to Tamzine and Sonia, who were sitting in the shade of the copper beech.

‘It’s only fair to tell you,’ she began, ‘that Rosalie and Daffodil have been talking, and I couldn’t help hearing.’

‘I can quite believe it,’ said Daffodil’s cousin. ‘That’s why we didn’t tell Till Owlglass long ago. Unfortunately she found out last night, thanks to Lisabel Durrant’s red hair; it always means something extra special in the way of temper! She said too much, and young Daffodil found out.’

‘Can you keep her from spreading it all over the school?’ Sonia asked anxiously. ‘If you and Gwyneth could keep it to yourselves——! I feel it’s really my fault. Rhoda will hate it, if the girls begin talking. And she’s feeling rotten already.’

‘She’s gone off by herself,’ Tamzine said. ‘She wouldn’t have even us with her.’

‘Gwyn and I won’t say anything,’ Robin promised. ‘But I do think it would be better if we knew what it’s all about. We’ve only heard their hints.’

The other two looked at one another. Then Tamzine agreed. ‘You’d better know. You’re a quiet, sensible sort of person; you won’t chatter.’

Robin laughed. ‘Wait till I fetch Gwyn! She needn’t have it second hand from me.’

She came back presently with Gwyneth, and they stood together before the seat on which Tamzine and Sonia were sitting. Robin refused an invitation to sit beside them, and stood with her arm through Gwyneth’s, waiting for the story.

Tamzine told it quickly; the death of Rhoda’s brother, the boy Earl; the discovery of the baby heir, who came nearer to the title than Rosalie’s brother Bill, and the resentment on Bill’s account, felt more deeply by Rhoda and her mother than by Bill and Rosalie themselves; Rhoda’s sore feeling against the girl who was the stepsister and guardian of the baby Roderick, and her dismay at the news that this hated cousin was to marry the new Earl and become the Countess of Kentisbury.

‘She’s taking the place that should have belonged to Rhoda’s brother’s wife, when he married. Until then, Rhoda’s mother expected to be the boss of the Castle and the head of the family. This girl has pushed them out.’

‘And “this girl” is Rosamund, at the Squirrel House, who teaches us country-dancing and weaves on a loom. And we found it out at midnight,’ said Sonia.

‘How did you find out?’ Gwyneth demanded, while Robin thought over the story, her eyes grave. ‘Why did she tell you at midnight, when she’d said nothing about it in the morning?’

‘She didn’t tell us. Miss Durrant spoke to her as “Rosamund Kane,” and then Rhoda knew. Then Rosamund explained.’

‘What did Rhoda say?’

Robin cut short the question. ‘I’m sorry for Rhoda. She must have had a fearful shock. In a way, it’s like what happened to us, isn’t it, Gwyneth *fach*? Quite different, but the same sort of idea. Rhoda won’t be happy as long as she tries to fight against her cousin.’

‘No. I could tell her that,’ said Gwyneth.

‘What do you mean?’ Sonia asked. ‘What happened to you? Oh, is it a story? We’ve been wondering if you two had a story behind you!’

‘Tell us, Robin *fach!*’ Tamzine begged.

Robin looked at Gwyneth. ‘Shall we? It’s for you to say.’

‘Tell them, if you like, so long as I’m here to see that you’re fair about it; fair to Robin Brent, I mean!’ Gwyneth remarked. ‘I can’t see myself that Rhoda’s worries are anything like ours were; but you’re a discerning person, and if you say so I suppose there must be some likeness. If you think it will help them to help Rhoda, tell them anything you like. But be fair to yourself and tell the truth about me.’

Robin laughed and slipped her arm round her adopted sister’s shoulders; and Gwyneth let it lie there without protest.

‘I shall tell the story in my own way,’ said Robin.

‘And then I shall have my say,’ Gwyneth assured her.

‘You might tell us, anyway!’ Tamzine and Sonia looked up at them eagerly.

CHAPTER 15. ROBIN'S STORY

'It happened when we were only twelve,' Robin began. 'Rhoda's so much older that she ought to be able to do more to help than we could. And yet I don't know; perhaps it's harder for her, because she's older. This is the dreadful thing that happened! I inherited the lovely house in Wales, where Gwyneth *fach* had lived for years. Her guardian, who had adopted her as a baby, died, and he hadn't made a new will. He'd left everything to me. And Gwyn had lived there always.' She looked down at the two girls with wide, brown eyes. 'It was dreadful for her, and it was simply awful for me.'

'What an awkward position!' Sonia exclaimed.

'How perfectly ghastly for you both!' Tamzine cried. 'What did you do? And why did he do it?'

'He was my godfather, though I had never seen him,' Robin explained. 'He was Robert Quellyn, the great Welsh painter. He put Gwyneth *fach* into several of his pictures, as the Black Curly-Headed Maiden who rode on the yellow mule.'

'The Quellyn pictures! Rosalie says she's seen them.'

'In the gallery in London,' Robin agreed. 'Robert Quellyn knew my mother and wanted to marry her, long ago; he asked if he might be my godfather, and they named me Robertina after him. But I was never called that—I've two brothers, and you couldn't expect boys to say Robertina! Mr. Quellyn adopted Gwyneth, whose father and mother had died; but he forgot to alter his will. He was an artist, and I suppose he forgot everything but his pictures. It was very difficult for us both——'

'And I made it worse,' Gwyneth took up the story. 'I was living at Moranedd, when he died; and Robin came——'

'Where was that? It's a lovely name, the way you say it,' Sonia exclaimed, delighting in the soft, Welsh word.

'Moranedd—"the house by the sea." It's the cottage on the shore where we used to live, when we wanted to be closer to the water than we were at Quellyn.'

'Plas Quellyn is the big house,' Robin explained. 'I went with Mother and the boys to see the place; they were curious to see my new property—how the boys teased me, about having to learn Welsh to talk to the natives! I went to make friends with Gwyneth *fach*; we'd been told about her, and I felt how horribly unfair it all was.'

'And I was an absolute little beast,' said Gwyneth. 'I wouldn't make friends. I wouldn't be nice. I was horrid in every way I could.'

'Well, it was dreadful for you! I'd have been just as bad in your place.'

'Oh, no, indeed, you couldn't. You haven't got it in you! I did everything I could to show her how much I hated her, Tammy.'

'You didn't see that it was horrid for me, too,' Robin said.

'But you made friends at last!' Tamzine cried. 'You're real chums; there's no patched-up feeling between you. You really do like one another! How did it happen?'

'We like one another very much indeed, whatever,' said Gwyneth. 'It was Robin's doing. She was a brick.'

Tamzine smothered a laugh at that ‘whateffer.’ ‘You’re still rather Welshy, Gwyneth *fach*! How did Robin do it?’

‘I’ll always be Welsh. I want to be; yes, indeed!’

‘It just happened,’ Robin said. ‘Gwyn found I wasn’t as bad as she thought, and we made friends.’

‘Robin was jolly generous, but she won’t say so. That’s what I meant by saying she must be fair to herself. She’ll only tell you half the story,’ Gwyneth interrupted. ‘She happened to find out my secrets, and my private places, and she left them for me and wouldn’t have me disturbed—and after the way I’d been going on to her! And she and the boys saved my treasures from burglars. I had a lot of pictures and sketches of Daddy’s that he’d given to me, and thieves came after them, and Robin and the others helped to save them. We all made friends during the siege of my secret place, and I found out how decent Robin had been, and I felt bad. I said so, and things were all right.’

‘You were jolly decent too,’ Robin exclaimed. ‘Look how you helped, when we heard Father was so ill and we were crazy for news of him, away there in Wales! It was you who brought us the good news, Gwyneth *fach*.’

‘And you adopted Gwyneth instead of your godfather?’ said Sonia, while Tamzine gazed at the two and turned the story over in her mind.

‘She came into our family. I’d always wanted a sister; it was great luck to get one of my own age! We’re going to divide the property as soon as we’re of age.’

‘Is that how you’ve settled it? But will your people let you give it up?’

‘Mother and Father know I don’t feel it’s really mine,’ Robin said gravely. ‘If Gwyneth *fach* has a fair half, I shall feel the rest is mine, and I’ll love having it. I love the place; we spend all our holidays there. But until I’ve handed over half of it to Gwyneth, I don’t feel it’s mine at all.’

Sonia and Tamzine looked at Gwyneth.

‘It’s what Daddy would have wished,’ she said. ‘By “Daddy” I mean Mr. Quellyn. I used to be called Gwyneth Quellyn; but my real name is Morgan, and I don’t want to forget my own parents, though I don’t remember them. When I went to live with Robin, we decided I should go back to my own name. I didn’t want to forget Daddy Quellyn either; he was very, very good to me. But when Plas Quellyn really belonged to Robin, it didn’t seem right for me to stick to the name. I believe Daddy would have wanted me to have something; I know he would.’

‘Of course he would. I still think you ought to have it all; but I’ve been saying it for five years and I’m tired of it,’ said Robin.

‘No, he must have wanted to give it to you. The only way to be fair to him is to divide it, whatever the lawyers say.’

‘We must do what we believe he’d have wanted,’ Robin agreed. ‘But we have to wait till I’m twenty-one. No one will hear of anything being done till then. So at present it’s just an understanding between our two selves, though the rest of the family know what we mean to do.’

‘How will you divide it?’ Tamzine asked; with interest. ‘Draw a line down the middle of the estate and build a wall and a moat?’

Gwyneth laughed. ‘Indeed, I would not have Plas Quellyn spoiled like that!’

‘Gwyneth will take Moranedd and the farm near it, and a share of the money; and I shall have Plas Quellyn and its gardens. We both like Moranedd best, so it’s very fair! It’s a lovely

little house, and the sea washes up almost to the windows. We always stay there when we go to Quellyn.'

'I couldn't be happy at Quellyn, unless I had Moranedd too,' said Gwyneth. 'Quellyn is too much like a castle. I'd always be wanting to run away to Moranedd. Robin can be Miss Brent of Quellyn.'

'If Robin's going to be Miss Brent of Quellyn, I can quite see that you don't want to be Miss Quellyn of Mor-Something I can't say,' said Tamzine.

'Moranedd. No, it wouldn't do. That's what we felt,' Gwyneth assented.

'Miss Morgan of Moranedd sounds less muddling. I shall come and stay with you at Moranedd, when I want the seaside,' Robin said.

'It sounds a very jolly arrangement,' Sonia exclaimed. 'Nice for you both!

'What did you mean about Rhoda, Robin?' Tamzine asked. 'I've been puzzling over it. Did you mean that only being sporting and generous was any use?'

'Yes, indeed, that's it,' Gwyneth nodded. 'That's what Robin was to me.'

Robin reddened. 'I wouldn't have put it that way. I mean that Rhoda will never get anywhere by fighting against her cousin; as long as she thinks she hates her they'll be stuck in a hole. If Rhoda could pull herself out of the mess her thoughts are in, and see her cousin's point of view, there would be some chance. She's thinking only of her own side of it; you have to look at things all round.'

Tamzine regarded her with admiring approval. 'Gosh, Robin Brent, you're jolly well right! I suppose that's experience?'

'Experience of me, when I was a little beast,' said Gwyneth.

'A little silly, perhaps,' Robin retorted. 'Isn't it true, Tamzine? You needn't mock!'

'Very, very true, but hard to remember,' Tamzine said sadly. 'To see the other person's point of view—to remember that the other person *has* a point of view! Yes, that would help, ever so often. And Rosamund has a point of view, hasn't she?'

'Of course. It's dreadful for her to be marrying into a family that doesn't want her. Can't you make Rhoda see that?'

'I don't think I dare try,' Tamzine groaned. 'I'll tell Rhoda your story, if I may, and perhaps she'll see what you want her to see. But I can't say too much. One can go a certain length with Rhoda Kane, but there's a point at which she shuts you up. When she turns on the "ancient nobility" stunt, I shrivel and remember she's an Earl's granddaughter.'

'Yes, she can put on a "Lady Rhoda" air, and then it's best not to say any more,' Sonia agreed.

'It's a terrible pity she feels so sore about it,' Robin sighed. 'Rosamund's so jolly; we all loved her at the class. Rhoda loved her too, until she knew.'

'She'll make a beautiful Countess,' Tamzine said. 'You should have seen her when she found us in her house! I felt a worm, and about an inch high, although she was in her nightgown and with her hair down.'

'It was a pretty nightgown, and such a jolly dressing-gown, rich blue, like the birds on our curtains,' Sonia remarked. 'And her hair's lovely; so thick and long, Robin.'

'It must be, to make those big coils. It can't have been easy to be dignified when she'd come straight out of bed!'

'She managed it. We were all dumb. Oh, we must tell you about her aunt! Such a marvellous aunt!' cried Tamzine, and broke into a description of shy Elspeth Abbott.

Rhoda came from a lonely corner of the garden at tea time, carrying a letter to her mother, into which she had poured all her shocked surprise at finding her unknown cousin living so close to her. The writing of her trouble had given her some relief, but it had also stirred up the bitterness she felt against Rosamund; and her face was so stern and forbidding that Tamzine and Sonia looked at one another behind her back.

‘Lady Rhoda! Nothing doing,’ Tamzine murmured.

She waylaid Rosalie and Daffodil after tea. ‘Where have you two been all afternoon? Remember your promise to Rosamund!’

‘We haven’t been out of bounds,’ Daffodil said indignantly. ‘We’ve been frightfully noble, Tammy! We found the most gorgeous place; but it was across the main road, so we only looked—because of Rosamund.’

‘I hope you did only look! Where or what was it?’

‘Over there,’ Daffodil nodded vaguely. ‘A common, all heather and bracken and sandy paths, with pine trees.’

‘Lots of the trees had fallen and were lying all over the ground,’ Rosalie added. ‘It would be topping to climb about in them, Tamzine! And the place looked as if it would be full of rabbits. But we couldn’t go, because of Rosamund.’

‘I should think not! It’s a jolly good thing Rosamund made you promise,’ Tamzine exclaimed. ‘You’d break your necks, scrambling in a place like that!’

‘Oh, Tam-o’-Shanter, we wouldn’t!’

‘You’d sprain your ankles, then. Isn’t Rhoda going to cheer up, Rosalie? What did she say to you, when you went off last night?’

‘She was fearfully upset,’ Rosalie said soberly. ‘She’d liked Rosamund; and now, of course, she can’t.’

‘I call that silly,’ Tamzine retorted. ‘Rosamund isn’t any different. Rhoda likes her still, but she’s fighting against her because she knows who Rosamund is.’

‘Oh, but she can’t like her, if she’s our cousin! She’s always said she hated that cousin! It’s spoiled the tuck-shop and the Squirrel place and the whole school for Rhoda.’

‘Rhoda’s an idiot, then. What’s she going to do on Tuesday afternoon?’

‘She won’t go to the dancing, I’m sure of that.’

‘What will you do?’ Tamzine demanded.

Rosalie paused before replying. ‘I shall go to the class. I like the dancing, and I like Rosamund.’

‘Oh? You’re going to throw Rhoda over?’

‘No, I’m not! But I don’t feel as bad as she does, and I like country-dancing. I don’t see why I should miss the class.’

‘Neither do I! I don’t know what Miss Rainey will say, if Rhoda doesn’t turn up.’

‘Miss Rainey won’t make her dance, when she knows how bad Rho feels,’ Rosalie said confidently.

Miss Rainey had already noticed the change in Rhoda. It had, indeed, been obvious to everybody.

‘What’s the matter with Rhoda Kane?’ the girls were asking.

‘What’s wrong with her, Rosalie? She’s your cousin; don’t you know?’

‘She’s had bad news,’ said Rosalie. ‘No, not her mother. Auntie’s all right. It’s about somebody else.’

This was enough to quieten the girls, but it did not satisfy Miss Rainey. She had her suspicions as to what had happened, and she consulted Lisabel Durrant for confirmation.

‘Do you know what has upset Rhoda Kane so badly? She looks really ill. As she is on your landing I thought you might have some idea.’

‘She has found out that the cousin she dislikes so much is living near her,’ Lisabel said, with no beating about the bush.

‘Ah! I was afraid it was that. It was sure to come out; I thought she should have been told at once. How did it happen? I suppose that child at the tuck-shop chattered?’

‘No, I was the culprit,’ Lisabel said coolly. ‘I carelessly used Rosamund’s name before the girls.’

Miss Rainey raised her eyebrows. ‘That was unfortunate.’

‘It was careless, and I’m very sorry about it. But the mischief’s done. Apparently Rhoda can’t forgive Rosamund for existing.’

‘You know Miss Kane well, I understand?’

‘I’ve known her for a year and a half.’

‘Do you know if it is true, as I have heard, that the health of the new Earl of Kentisbury has improved greatly since his engagement to Miss Kane?’

‘I believe he’s a different creature,’ said Lisabel. ‘He’s in London having special treatment just now. He’s enormously better. Rosamund has done him all the good in the world.’

‘Thank you. I shall speak to Rhoda,’ said the headmistress.

She sent for Rhoda next morning. ‘My dear, I have been troubled about you all yesterday.’

Rhoda grew scarlet. ‘Miss Rainey, I want to go home.’

‘Home? After less than a week at school? And why?’

‘Because I’ve discovered that the girl at the Squirrel House is Rosamund Kane, a sort of cousin, whom we don’t like at all. I can’t bear to be so near her.’

‘And why don’t you like her?’

‘Because she’s marrying Uncle Geoffrey for his title,’ Rhoda said bitterly.

Miss Rainey looked at her gravely. ‘My dear Rhoda, what grounds have you for that extraordinary statement?’

Rhoda caught her breath. ‘Miss Rainey, can’t you understand? She’s going to take Mother’s place—the place Geoff’s wife would have had.’ Her voice broke, and she stood fighting for self-control.

‘My child, you must try to reconcile yourself to the new position,’ Miss Rainey spoke more gently. ‘We all sympathize deeply with you in the tragedy that has come on your family. Because I understand, I am not being as severe on your attitude to your cousin as perhaps I ought to be. But the blow has fallen, and you must accept it. Your uncle is the head of the family now; and if he chooses to take a wife, that position will be hers also, and no longer your mother’s. From all I have heard, his marriage, even in prospect, has improved his health very greatly; already Miss Kane has done him good. Your feeling against her is prejudice and you will have to overcome it. She is going to be your aunt before many months have passed
_____’

‘My aunt!’ Rhoda gasped. ‘I hadn’t—oh, how ghastly!’

‘Of course she will be your aunt, and a very delightful aunt, I should say. Now, Rhoda dear, you will have to get used to the idea, and the sooner the better, for your own happiness.’

‘I can’t bear it!’ Rhoda cried. ‘Let me go away, Miss Rainey!’

‘Where do you want to go? Your mother is on the sea by this time.’

‘I could go home.’

‘I understood your uncle would be living at the Castle. How could you go there, feeling as you do about his future wife? Don’t be absurd, my dear! You must conquer your foolish prejudices.’

‘It isn’t fair for that girl to come and live here,’ Rhoda said, her face dark.

‘She has lived here for a long time. It is you who have come to disturb her,’ Miss Rainey pointed out.

‘I didn’t know!’ Rhoda flared up. ‘I’d never have come—Mother would never have sent me—if we’d known.’

‘Rhoda, you are being very foolish,’ Miss Rainey said severely. ‘Your attitude to Miss Kane is more than silly; it is wrong. Go away and think it over; I hope you will soon come to your senses. You are acting like a silly child.’

But as she looked at Rhoda, she knew that Rhoda was not a child. She looked tall, in her working smock; and her coiled dark hair made her look like a woman.

Rhoda stood with bent head, her hands clenched, but she said no more.

Miss Rainey, looking very serious, dismissed her to her morning classes.

CHAPTER 16.

RHODA WEEDS THE CABBAGES

Wild thoughts of running away and hiding somewhere were surging through Rhoda's mind, as she pruned and tied ramblers under Lisabel's directions and read French with Miss Trevor. Even a riding-lesson in the afternoon, and a lecture on symptoms of illness in dogs and cats and horses, did not cheer her.

The thought of the next day's country-dancing was weighing on her heavily. It would not be easy to go to Miss Rainey with a request for leave of absence, after the way the Head had spoken; but the thought of dancing for Rosamund, of dancing at all in her present mood, was impossible.

The difficulty had to be faced, and Rhoda gathered up her courage and went to meet it. She sought the headmistress and asked if she might speak to her.

'Need I go to the dancing-class, please, Miss Rainey? I couldn't dance.'

The Head gazed at her in silence.

Rhoda looked back at her steadily, her face set.

'No, you had better not go,' Miss Rainey said at last. 'The look on your face would spoil the class for everyone. You had better weed the vegetable garden—unless you would prefer to read French?'

Rhoda, scarlet, said quickly: 'I thought perhaps I could put in extra practising.'

'The sound of your piano might disturb the dancing. It had better be weeding, in the back garden. You will be out of everybody's way there.'

Rhoda thanked her and walked away, holding her head high, with more than a touch of what Tamzine called the 'ancient nobility stunt', a dignified hauteur which reminded those who saw it of her title. Miss Rainey, more pitying than impressed, sighed and grieved for her.

The effect of the Head's suggestion was to make Rhoda feel in disgrace. She had meant to hold herself aloof with dignity from the country-dancers, and had proposed piano-practice with a hardly-recognized idea that her music might, indeed, conflict with the thin sound of Gail's dulcitone. Instead, she found herself working alone among the raspberry bushes, pulling up groundsel and digging out bindweed, still in her morning suit, when the rest of the school were gathered on the lawn in pretty summer frocks. They were talking and laughing, and Rosamund's appearance with Gail was greeted with a cheer.

Only a wall separated the kitchen-garden from the lawn. Rhoda knew everything that went on: the moment of Rosamund's arrival, the tune of the first dance. She bit her lips and worked on steadily. Even though no one had missed her——

But that was not fair. Sonny and Tamzine had been distressed, and had begged her to change her mind. As they dressed for the afternoon, they had pleaded with her. Rhoda knew she could not say they had not missed her. But none of them understood. Rosalie had been as eager for the class as anybody.

'I don't know how Rosalie can!' Rhoda muttered, as she attacked the bindweed with great bitterness.

Rosamund had come to the class in some anxiety, and she was at the same time relieved and disappointed to see, at her first quick glance, that Rhoda was not there. She made no comment, but called to the girls to take their partners for 'Corn Rigs.'

'Presently we're going to do "Put on Thy Smock on a Monday." Don't you think that's tactful on my part?'

'Oh—Rosamund! Is there really a dance called that?'

'A very jolly little dance, for three couples, in a ring. Now let me see your polka step. Oh, are we one short to-day? Then I'll dance. Who will have me for a partner?'

Half the school offered to have her. Rosalie, basely throwing over Daffodil, was one of the first to shout: 'Oh, Rosamund, take *me!*'

Rosamund laughed and held out her hand. 'I must be man, as I'm taller than you. Can you find somebody else, Daffodil?'

Tamzine and Sonia looked at one another. 'Poor old Rhoda would be upset, wouldn't she?'

'They're a little bit alike; I mean Rosalie and Rosamund. There's a family likeness,' Sonia said.

'Rosalie isn't as good-looking as Rosamund yet. She may be more like her when she's older. They must be proper Kanes, and like some remote ancestor,' Tamzine remarked. 'Poor Rhoda isn't like the family. It's hard on her.'

'Is Rhoda feeling very sore?'

 Rosamund asked, as she swung her partner.

'I say, how beautifully you do it! It isn't like that with any of the others,' Rosalie exclaimed.

'That's practice. Tell me about Rhoda.'

'She's feeling bad. She wouldn't come. So Miss Rainey said she could weed the cabbages.'

'Poor kid! I want to be friends, you know.'

'I know,' Rosalie agreed. 'I'm sorry about Rhoda. I'd help if I could.'

'Leave her alone for a little while. It's still a new idea, and she's feeling sick. Perhaps she'll like me later on.'

'How is your baby brother? the boy who's to be the earl instead of Geoffrey-Bill?'

Rosamund laughed. 'Is Geoffrey-Bill your brother? I'm sorry Roderick has robbed him of the title, but we couldn't help it. I was as much surprised as anybody when my father married again.'

'I expect you weren't pleased, were you?'

Rosamund coloured. 'He's dead, Rosalie. We won't blame him now.'

'Oh! No, I'm sorry; we won't say things about him. Tell me about Roderick.'

'Roddy is very well. If I bring him to the Squirrel House some day, will you come to see him?'

'I'd love it!' Rosalie's eyes sparkled.

'I won't forget. Now you must dance with Daffodil. I'll find another partner.'

'You can have all the partners you want at this party!' Rosalie told her, laughing.

'Put on Thy Smock' was cheered by the girls, as a 'dear little dance,' but their inexperience showed in the difficulty they found in controlling their movement in the turns.

'We always go miles too far!' Daffodil groaned, hastily adjusting her position.

Sonia was hunting wildly for a lost 'woman,' whom she had left behind by about a yard. 'It isn't as easy as it looks! Can we try again?'

'I was afraid it would be too hard for you,' Rosamund retorted. 'A three-quarter swing will leave you exactly in position.'

'I'd rather do once and three-quarters,' said Tamzine.

‘You wouldn’t know where you were at the end of it. The set would be all out of shape. You must try to cultivate a sense of design,’ Rosamund suggested. ‘Always remember the pattern you’re supposed to be making.’

‘The pattern! That’s a good idea!’

Rosamund laughed. ‘It’s a very important idea. Now have another try! Then we must go back to “Christchurch Bells.” We mustn’t do all new work.’

‘Oh, but the new ones are so thrilling!’ Rosalie cried.

‘I know. I’m trying to restrain myself. I’d like to go on doing new ones all the time. It’s too tempting for words to have a class that knows absolutely nothing.’

The girls laughed, and one asked curiously: ‘How many dances do you know?’

‘About a hundred and twenty! I’m afraid we won’t get through them this term.’

‘A hundred—why, how many are there? Do you know all the dances there are?’

‘Not quite. But I’ve danced a lot. I lived for seven years in a dancing family, in a dancing village.’

‘Oh, where? Where was it?’

‘Oxfordshire—Chiltern hills—near Gracedieu Abbey. Now try this once more, and then make up a longways set.’

‘There’s that other jolly round one we had last week,’ Sonia suggested, when they were resting. ‘Something about leaves.’

‘Sage and onions,’ said Tamzine. ‘“Sage Leaf,” Rosamund.’

‘I haven’t forgotten “Sage Leaf”; we’ll have it after this. It might muddle you to have two round dances at once, especially when they number in different ways.’

‘So they do! I hadn’t noticed that.’

Rosamund laughed. ‘“Sage Leaf” is an exception to the general rule. Have you forgotten the clapping in this one?’

‘Couldn’t you stay and have tea with us?’ Sonia pleaded, when the class was over.

‘How could I—at present?’ Rosamund gave her a quick look. ‘Wasn’t that rather thoughtless?’

‘Oh, bother Rhoda!’ Sonia groaned. ‘Why can’t she be sensible? But you could, you know. We shall have tea out here, as it’s so hot. We sit where we like. You could have tea with Tam and me and Rosalie, under one tree, and Rhoda could——’ she paused.

‘Rho could gloom all by herself under another,’ said Tamzine. ‘It wouldn’t do, Son.’

‘I couldn’t bear to see Rhoda “glooming” all alone. What a dreadful word, Thomasina!’ Rosamund teased.

‘Oh! It’s *not* my name!’ Tamzine shouted.

‘I didn’t suppose it was.’

‘Will you teach us again on Saturday?’ Sonia begged, as they walked with Rosamund towards the tuck-shop, while Gail followed in the middle of another crowd. ‘What an idiot Rhoda is! She won’t know anything about “Put on Thy Smock”!’

‘Not on Saturday. I’m not usually here at the week-end. I stayed last week because I wanted to do some more weaving; the dress is nearly finished, and it’s time it was done now.’

‘And then you wasted your Saturday morning teaching us!’

‘If it was wasted. I somehow thought it wasn’t,’ Rosamund said laughing. ‘I shall go home next week-end, to be with my small brother.’

‘He’s quite a baby, isn’t he?’ Tamzine asked.

‘A year and eight months old. He’s at a fascinating stage.’

‘He’s going to be an Earl some day, isn’t he?’

‘Possibly. Don’t come any farther with me. Go back and get your tea.’

‘Oh, but there isn’t anybody else except your brother, is there? Rhoda said there wasn’t anyone,’ Tamzine exclaimed.

‘Goodbye!’ said Rosamund, and went off hurriedly and left them.

‘Tam, you idiot!’ said Sonia. ‘She’s going to marry the Earl. She might have a family. If she has, her brother won’t be the next Earl.’

‘Oh, I see!’ Tamzine looked thoughtful. ‘Queer, if she’s bringing Roderick up to be the Earl and then she goes and dishes his chances!’

‘You can never tell what will happen when people get married,’ said Sonia wisely. ‘It’s a pity he’s her cousin, isn’t it?’

‘We’ll ask Rosalie. He may be only a second cousin or something.’

Rosalie confirmed this. ‘Her father was Uncle Geoffrey’s cousin. They aren’t really very near relations. And we’re farther off still, of course. Rhoda’s father and hers were cousins, but I’m only a distant connection.’

‘You’ve a bit of likeness to Rosamund, all the same.’

‘That’s the family coming out. Everybody says Geoffrey-Bill and I are like the family. Poor old Rhoda’s very sick that she isn’t.’

‘I know. We’ve heard how she feels. It’s rough on her. But she’s being rotten about Rosamund. It’s fearfully hard on Rosamund to feel she’s marrying into a family that can’t bear her,’ Tamzine said.

‘Shall I tell you what I think?’

‘If it’s worth hearing. Do you think you’re worth listening to, young Rosalie?’

‘Sometimes.’ Rosalie flung back her yellow curls and swung her legs, as she perched on the gate of the kitchen-garden. ‘I think Rhoda likes Rosamund. That’s why it has been such a deadly shock to find out that Rosamund was—Rosamund. See what I mean?’

‘We understand you,’ Tamzine agreed. ‘I said the same thing. Rhoda’s fighting against herself. She wants to like Rosamund.’

‘And she’s said she never will,’ Sonia added.

‘She thinks she never will,’ Rosalie said. ‘In fact, she’s sure she never will. But I’m not sure. She likes Rosamund herself already, but she can’t bear to think Rosamund’s the person she’d made up her mind to hate.’

‘Perhaps something will happen to change her mind,’ Sonia said hopefully. ‘But we can’t do anything. She won’t let us say a word.’

‘I’ve said a lot,’ said Rosalie darkly. ‘But it hasn’t been much good.’

CHAPTER 17.

ROSAMUND'S INVITATION

Rhoda listened in silence when Tamzine and Sonia, in a sort of duet, told her about Robin and Gwyneth and the Quellyn inheritance.

'Jolly interesting. I thought there was a story about those two. I'm sure Robin would be sporting; anyone can see she's an extra decent sort,' she said, but gave no sign of applying the moral to herself and her own troubles.

Miss Rainey was watching matters closely. When, after several days, Rhoda was still silent and unhappy, shut up and brooding within herself, the headmistress took action.

She went to the Squirrel House one afternoon, when the girls were working in the garden or the garage, and asked Elspeth Abbott if she could speak to Miss Kane.

'Rosamund is in her own house. I'll call her,' Elspeth said, and turned to the door.

'Ask if I may come to her,' said Miss Rainey.

Elspeth returned presently and begged her to go into the Rose House. 'Rosamund is weaving. Perhaps you won't mind going into the back room.'

'I would like to see the loom in use,' and Miss Rainey went through the garden and the pretty front room of the adjoining cottage.

Rosamund rose from her seat at the loom to receive the guest. 'Is there anything I can do? Have you come about Rhoda?'

'You've guessed my errand,' Miss Rainey said gravely. 'But won't you go on with your work? I should like to watch.'

Rosamund looked very sober as she sat down again. 'If I were doing pattern, I couldn't concentrate on it. I'm too troubled about that girl. But my pattern is finished. I must end with a strip of plain material; the pattern shows up better if there is a plain border. I don't need to think about this. How can I help? I would like to help Rhoda, but I don't see how to do it.'

Miss Rainey watched her busy hands. The diamond ring was laid aside, lest it should catch in the threads.

'I wondered if you could ask Rhoda here, perhaps using the loom as an inducement, and then try to talk sense to her. She is making herself very unhappy, and it is so silly.'

Rosamund worked steadily for a few minutes. Then, resting her hand on the loom, she looked up at Miss Rainey.

'I'll invite Rhoda, if you wish. But I don't think she will come. If she comes, I don't believe it will be any use. She is very deeply prejudiced against me.'

'I know. I am terribly grieved about her attitude to you. I would not have believed it would be so bitter.'

'I knew it was bitter.' Rosamund began to work again, her lips compressed. 'Don't blame her too much,' she pleaded presently. 'She had a shock when she heard who I was. We were making friends; if I'd had a little longer, I might have built up something real, which would not have crumbled so completely. The discovery came too soon.'

'I was sorry to hear Miss Durrant had been so careless.'

'Lisabel never thinks when she's in a temper. She was angry—about something,' Rosamund added quickly, remembering that Miss Rainey did not know all the circumstances of Lisabel's betrayal. 'Miss Rainey, if I may, I will ask Rhoda and her group of friends to

come. If she refuses, I'll try to get her to come alone. Perhaps she would feel it easier to come with the others, and we might find ourselves on more friendly terms without knowing quite how it had happened. I know they would all like to see the loom in use; and they are such a jolly little set! I love Sonia and Tamzine; and I must have Rosalie and Daffodil, of course!

Miss Rainey raised her eyebrows. 'You want to have a big party! You won't do anything with Rhoda in a crowd like that.'

'Even if she would come with the others and be interested, it would be something,' Rosamund urged. 'Will you tell them I have invited them? Would to-morrow afternoon do?'

'They could come to-morrow very well; suppose we say just after tea? That won't interfere with their afternoon work. I hope Rhoda will come.'

'I don't believe she will,' Rosamund said to herself when Miss Rainey had gone. 'But at least I shall have given her the chance.'

She was not surprised when Rosalie rushed in the next afternoon, crying: 'Rhoda hasn't come, Cousin Rosamund. We said all we could, but she wouldn't come.'

'She'd rather weed cabbages, wouldn't she?' Rosamund smiled. 'I'm not surprised.'

'She's an awful idiot,' said Daffodil, following her friend. 'Fancy missing such a jolly chance! Will you show us how you do the weaving?'

Tamzine and Sonia came in more soberly. 'It's lovely of you to ask us, Rosamund. We are so sorry we haven't brought Rhoda with us. We've told her what we think of her.'

'She's an ass,' Tamzine added bluntly.

'Oh, no! You must try to see her position,' Rosamund said quickly. 'She has quite a definite point of view. I've appeared from nowhere—from this country tea-shop, to be exact—and I've not only brought with me a baby heir, who has ousted Rosalie's brother, but I'm going to marry her uncle and take her mother's place at the head of the family. You can't blame Rhoda too much; you can see how she feels, and why.'

Tamzine and Sonia looked at her and then at one another. 'That's what Robin said. She said Rhoda must try to understand your point of view.'

'That was very discerning of Robin. You mean Robin Brent, the pretty, brown girl with the Welsh stepsister?'

'Yes, but Gwyneth isn't a step; she's been adopted into Robin's family. Robin asked what Rosalie and Daffodil were talking about, so we had to tell them about you; they sleep in the Robin room together.'

Rosamund nodded. 'And Robin gave you good advice for Rhoda?'

'She told us the story of her and Gwyneth and Quellyn; and she said——'

'Quellyn?' Rosamund stared at her. 'Did you say Quellyn? How very odd!'

'Why? Do you know it?' Rosalie cried.

'They say it's a lovely place,' Daffodil added.

'I know somebody called Quellyn, and it's a curious name.' Rosamund knit her brows. 'Who are Robin Brent and Gwyneth, I wonder?'

'Gwyneth used to be called Quellyn, though Morgan is really her name,' Sonia began. 'She was adopted first of all by Robert Quellyn, the Welsh painter.'

'Robin's godfather. Did you know him?' Tamzine was watching Rosamund's puzzled face curiously.

'I know now,' Rosamund exclaimed. 'A friend of mine is marrying Sir Ivor Quellyn, the musician. He's a cousin of Robert Quellyn, the painter. We knew there was a place in Wales,

and that it had been left to an English girl. So the girl is Robin Brent! Isn't that queer? And who is Gwyneth? Where does she come in?"

Eagerly Tamzine and Sonia told the story, in a duet, as usual; while the younger girls, to whom it was familiar, wandered round and into the front room, which they had seen only by the light of a very small lamp.

'Sonny! Sonny Raymond! Such a pretty room; you'll love it! Come and see!' Rosalie called.

'Won't you tell us where these gorgeous places in the pictures are, Rosamund?' Daffodil begged. 'And such jolly kiddies, heaps of them!'

Rosamund laughed. 'You'll find some old friends in there, Sonny Raymond. I know your Aunt Joan very well!'

'She said she knew the Squirrel girls!' Sonia dashed into the front room. 'Jansy and John—oh, rather! And here are the twins, their cousins; do you remember them, Tam? You saw them for a second, at the door.'

'Red heads; I remember,' Tamzine came to look. 'Topping pictures of them! Do you know them, too?' she turned to Rosamund.

'My home was with them for seven years; or rather, for several years before they were born, I lived in their house,' and Rosamund showed a picture of the Hall. 'The twins are to be my bridesmaids, some time next summer; I shall be married from the Hall.'

'Oh—Rosamund!' Rosalie whirled round with a shout. 'I'm a sort of cousin! I ought to be your bridesmaid!'

Rosamund looked at her, meaning in her eyes. 'There's only one thing I'd like better. We'll wait a while, Rosalie.'

'Oh! You mean—Rhoda and me?' Rosalie faltered. 'She never would, Rosamund.'

'I'm afraid not. But we'll wait. We'll say nothing about bridesmaids yet; there's plenty of time. I want a spring or summer wedding. The Hall is so beautiful in the spring.'

'We'll all come, and we'll dance country-dances for you,' Tamzine promised.

'On the village green, round the maypole. "Haste to the Wedding," to start the party,' Rosamund said laughing.

'Well, don't forget me! You ought to have one cousin to support you! Those twins will look sweet, but they're too small to be any good,' Rosalie urged.

'Oh, but I shall have Maidlin! That's arranged; she's to be my maid of honour. This is Maid, with the twinnies, in the garden.'

'The one the lovely frock is for—the singer?' Tamzine exclaimed, and came with Sonia to look. 'Oh, she is pretty! A regular Italian!'

'Does she know about her dress?' Sonia asked. 'Or is it a surprise?'

'She knows. She loves it, but she says it's too fine to wear. I say she must do Sir Ivor Quellyn credit, when she's singing for him.'

'Will you show us how you work the loom?' Sonia begged.

'Come back to the other room, then. I had the loom in here at first, but when I began a big piece of work I had it moved to the back room. We use this place for teas in wet weather, and I didn't want inquisitive people touching my work.'

Tamzine grew scarlet. 'That sounds like a hit at us. We really didn't touch, Rosamund.'

'I never meant that. I wasn't thinking of you. I know you didn't,' and Rosamund sat down at the loom. 'I haven't very much more to do.'

She began to pass the silvery shuttle quickly to and fro, and the girls stood watching, enthralled by the skilful movements.

‘How long has it taken to do the dress?’ Sonia asked.

‘A good many weeks. But I’ve enjoyed doing it.’

‘I should think so! But, I say!’ Tamzine exclaimed. ‘If it takes weeks to do one dress-piece, how do people make it pay? What would a bit like that cost? It must be worth hundreds of pounds, if it’s to pay you for several weeks’ work!’

Daffodil moved back hastily. ‘I’d better not stand too near it.’

Rosamund laughed. ‘It doesn’t take weeks, if you sit at it. Warping up the loom—that is, putting on these long threads—is a tiresome job and takes some time; but once that is done, the actual weaving is quick. You usually try to get more than one piece of work off each set of threads, to save time and trouble. If a different colour is thrown across the warp, you get quite a different result. It has taken me a long time because I haven’t been able to sit at it. It isn’t my only job, as it would be if I were weaving for my living. I’m not trying to make it pay.’

‘Oh, of course! I didn’t think,’ Tamzine admitted. ‘You help your pretty little aunt, don’t you?’

‘When she’s busy; she has a good woman to cook for her and a girl to wash up, and Gail helps when she isn’t in the tuck-shop. At rush times I go, too. But I’m not here all the time; I go to Verriton each week, to have a few days with Roddy and to see Geoffrey.’

Daffodil gazed at her seriously. ‘Will you tell us something? Why are you marrying him? I don’t mean about his title!’ at the outcry from the elder girls. ‘I mean, is it because you’re sorry for him and you want to take care of him? I know it isn’t so that you’ll be the Countess. I’m not a silly ass!’

Rosamund had reddened. ‘For a moment I thought you were.’

‘It’s just exactly what you are, Till Owlglass!’ Tamzine said wrathfully. ‘What do you mean by asking such a question?’

‘Well, you all want to know! I’ve asked, for the lot of us.’

Rosamund interposed. ‘It wasn’t a question that an older person would have asked,’ she said gravely. ‘But I expect a good many older people would like to ask it. Since you are such a child, Daffodil, I’ll answer you. At first I was sorry for him and I wanted to make up for the hampered life he had lived; he seemed to have missed so much. But I grew into something better. I’m marrying him because I want to, which is the best reason for marrying, isn’t it? He is ever so much stronger than he was, and he’s going to be stronger still. We shall be very happy.’ And she worked on with her silver threads, with here and there a gleam of gold.

‘It’s lovely for him,’ Tamzine said quietly. ‘You’ll be a gorgeous Countess!’

Rosamund laughed. ‘I shall try to be a good one, since there’s no help for it. But I shan’t be “gorgeous.” The idea doesn’t appeal to me at all.’

‘You know what we mean. Marvellous, then!’

‘Rosamund, Daffodil and I have found such a topping place!’ Rosalie was growing bored by the conversation. ‘I expect you know it; a jolly common, with fallen pine trees and heather and little sandy paths. We’re sure there are rabbits; we could see the holes.’

Rosamund paused and looked at her. ‘I know it. But it’s out of bounds for you, and you promised me you wouldn’t do mad things. Don’t go there, you two; it isn’t too safe. All those trees came down in a gale last spring; they were crashing about like ninepins. There are still a lot of big ones standing, and in a high wind they might fall.’

‘There’s going to be wind, or something,’ Daffodil said. ‘Miss Durrant’s been teaching us to read the barometer and know what the weather’s going to be. She made us look this afternoon; she says we’ll have a gale.’

‘Then keep away from elms and pines,’ Rosamund said. ‘There are millions of rabbits on that common, but I’m sure they don’t want a visit from you.’

‘We’d like to call on them!’ Rosalie wailed.

‘The common used to be protected by a little wood of oak trees. But a silly landlord has cut the wood down and talks of building on the land, and now the pines are open to the south-west and it’s too much for them. They’re top-heavy things,’ Rosamund said.

She glanced out of the window, where the trees of the garden were waving in the rising storm.

‘You’d better run off back to school, all of you. This is the first of the autumn gales; no more dancing on the lawn, I’m afraid! But you’ve a good hall and there aren’t very many of you. We shall have to get the polish off the floor; I’ve had a look at it. Now, off with you! I’d ask you to give my love to Rhoda, but I’m afraid she wouldn’t thank you, or me.’

‘Thank you just awfully much for letting us come!’ Sonia exclaimed. ‘We’ve loved it. We’re very sorry about Rhoda.’

‘Sorry, yes; but don’t be angry. Remember how sore she’s feeling.’

‘Is it enough if one person sees the other’s point of view? I wonder what Robin would say,’ Tamzine pondered, as she and Sonia followed the younger girls across the lawn. ‘Rosamund’s doing all that can be done in that line for poor old Rhoda. But I don’t see how she’s going to end the feud, unless Rhoda does something about it too.’

‘Perhaps Rhoda will come round in time,’ but Sonia did not sound hopeful.

CHAPTER 18. MAIDLIN'S DRESS

'And there's the great work finished!' and Rosamund sat back in her chair and gazed at the shining fabric, taken from the loom and folded neatly on its white wrapping-cloth. 'Maid will look lovely in it. I can just see it on a platform! I'll rewrite my letter; Rhoda never noticed how badly she had crumpled it! I'm quite sorry the frock is done; I shall feel lonely without it!'

She glanced out at the waving trees. 'It's been blowing all night and the wind's still rising. We're in for a gale, as I thought. I'm glad Rosalie mentioned the common yesterday; they might have wandered over there, and it's very unsafe in a storm. I'm always expecting the rest of those pines to come down.'

It was early afternoon, and she had settled down to finish her work, on condition that Elspeth called her if there was a rush of customers. It seemed unlikely, on such a blustery day, and Rosamund did not expect to be disturbed.

Her fountain pen was behaving badly. She fetched the ink-pot and sat down to write at the table beside the loom.

In the doorway Rhoda stood and stared at her. She had refused, abruptly and defiantly, to accompany the rest the day before—what would have been the use of seeing Rosamund before a crowd?—but she had something to say and she had come to say it. She was supposed to be at piano-practice; it had been easy to slip out by the garden window and race across the lawn.

Rosamund wrote on, her yellow head bent over her pad. That, Rhoda thought bitterly—that was the sort of hair she should have had; Rosamund was a real Kane, and Rhoda resented the fact intensely.

'I've come to say that it isn't a scrap of use——'

Rosamund sprang up. 'How you startled me! Do come in! It's so unpleasant outside.'

She went quickly to the door which led through to the Squirrel House and closed it. Then she turned to Rhoda.

'It isn't any use,' Rhoda cried. 'I could never like you. You needn't go on trying to make me change.' She had heard some words spoken carelessly by Rosalie, and had been stung into rage by the suggestion, which Tamzine had already voiced in her hearing, that she was fighting against herself and against her real liking for Rosamund. The very truth of the idea made her resent it more deeply.

'Have you thought,' Rosamund spoke quietly, 'what will be the end of this? Next year I shall marry your uncle. I shall be more closely related to you than I am already. It will be very uncomfortable for you and your mother if you will not recognize me. I'm afraid it will hurt you much more than it will me. Couldn't you think better of it, for the sake of the future? There's still plenty of time. It would be so much better for you.'

'But you're all right! You'll be the Countess; you'll have Kentisbury, and Verriton, and all. We shall be turned out of everything. I'm to swallow all my feelings and put up with you for the sake of—of what you can do for us, I suppose!'

Rosamund made a quick step forward. 'You silly child! I could shake you! Don't talk such utter rot!'

Rhoda sprang back. 'Don't touch me!'

'I won't. I'd be ashamed to.—Take care, idiot! Oh, take care!' Rosamund shouted.

But Rhoda, starting back, had flung herself against the table. It crashed down; pen and ink and paper fell in all directions.

Rhoda stood, stunned and horror-stricken. A stream of ink was soaking into the shining fabric. The stain on the glittering silver was a ghastly sight.

Rosamund sprang to it and snatched up the top fold. The ink was soaking through, to the beautiful strip of pattern, to the plain folds beneath. She dropped the piece she held.

'Well, that's done for,' she said, her voice dead and without expression.

Rhoda, shivering, stared at the horrible stain. 'It was an accident,' she muttered.

Rosamund turned on her in blazing fury. 'An accident! When you come here in a rage, and rush about without looking where you're going! An accident! You wicked girl! Go away, before I say too much. All those weeks of work!—and no time to do it again! Oh, Maidie, your lovely dress! You can't have it now!'

She dropped into her chair beside the loom and rested her head upon it, her whole body torn with a storm of sobbing. All her love for Maidlin had been put into the work for weeks. The shock had been too much.

Rhoda stared, numb and helpless. 'I ought to be glad. I wanted to hurt her.' The thought came unbidden, as if her conscience had spoken aloud. But she knew that she was not glad.

'It was an accident,' she gasped. 'It was! I never meant it.'

'Go away! Oh, can't you go?' Rosamund sobbed. 'Haven't you done enough harm?'

Rhoda turned and rushed out through the garden, not caring where she went.

The horror of the thing she had done was coming home to her. That stain, soaking into the precious silk, haunted her; she could see nothing else.

What had the dress-piece been worth? But the real worth was not in money, but in the love with which it had been woven. Nothing could ever make up to Rosamund for her disappointment; to offer her the value of the material would be only an insult. As for the unknown girl who was to have worn the dress—to have sung in it at her first public concert in London—Rhoda dared not think of her.

She ran on, desperately trying to escape from the vision. To go back and face the girls would have been impossible. What would Sonny say, when she heard? What would Tamzine think? And Rosalie? And Robin, with her gentle, quiet eyes? Robin would never understand that moment of wild rage, which had had such dire results.

The old stone wall of the garden brought Rhoda to a standstill. Beyond it was the road, and across the road lay the common, with its winding paths and fallen trees. It must have many hiding-places, and her instinct was to hide, till she grew more used to the thought of the awful thing she had done—till she had decided what to do. In the school garden she must soon be found.

Rhoda scrambled over the low wall, darted across the road, and was lost in the tangle of the common, where the bracken stood waist-high and dull gold. The noise made by the tossing trees was as wild as the tumult of her thoughts.

In the Rose House Rosamund's moment of despair was passing. She started up and bent over the damaged piece of silk. Could any of the length be saved? No washing or cleaning could ever give back the freshness to the yard which lay uppermost—the yard that held the intricate golden pattern. Had the ink soaked right through, to the plain lengths folded underneath?

Tight-lipped with distress, she unwrapped the silk, then threw it from her with a sob. The stain had gone through fold after fold.

‘It’s ruined,’ she said drearily. ‘I could do another for Maid; the warp is still on the loom. But not before October.’

She stood staring down at the heap of damaged silk. ‘That child came here meaning to hurt me. Well, she’s done it. The one thing that could really have hurt me to the very bones—Maidie’s dress! . . . I’d better put it out of sight.’

With a glimpse, even in that early moment, of what her attitude to Rhoda must be, Rosamund folded the silk and flung it into a great oak chest. ‘It’s no use doing anything to it. I might get the ink out with cleaning stuff, but the piece would never be fit to use. The silk wouldn’t stand it—not ink. And Maid couldn’t sing in the Queen’s Hall in a washed dress.’

She locked the chest and sat down beside the window, staring drearily out into the garden at the tossing trees. ‘No one must ever know. Maid—I shall have to tell Maid—but nobody else.’

For a long time she sat silent, facing up to the thought of that ugly scene and its consequences. At last, with a sigh, she rose, and found herself stiff and sore.

‘I feel as if I’d run ten miles! Well, that’s that. Maid’s dress is gone. I must go and tell her; I couldn’t write such a story. She’ll take it well, but she’ll be disappointed.’ She began to tidy the room, fetching a cloth to wipe up the ink which had stained the floor. ‘A pity I didn’t do this before! I oughtn’t to have gone to pieces like that. But it was a ghastly shock. I’m glad neither Gail nor Elspeth came in. That looks better!’

She stood beside the loom, gazing down at the white threads of the warp. ‘That poor child!’ she said slowly. ‘It’s worse for her. I feel bad enough, but I’d be feeling worse if I were the person who had done it. For it was an accident! She never meant to do any harm!’ Her lips tightened again. ‘It was an accident that should never have happened! It wouldn’t have happened if Rhoda had behaved herself. But I lost my temper too. She went too far. . . . I wonder what I said when it happened? I’m sure I blamed her; I felt she was to blame. Of course she *was*! But it wasn’t deliberate; she never meant it. I’m afraid I may have said too much. I mustn’t be unfair; whatever has happened, I mustn’t be unfair to Rhoda. If I said it was her fault—yes, I’d better put that right at once.’

She took up her pad, and gave a broken laugh at sight of the empty ink-pot. ‘Pencil, I think! I’m not to be trusted with ink. The poor kid will guess why it’s written in pencil!’

She scribbled a hurried note.

‘DEAR RHODA,

‘If I spoke unkindly just now, you must forgive me. When you think about it, you will allow for the results of the shock. What happened was an accident. I hope I did not say I considered you to blame. I don’t know what I said, but I hope it was not that. You didn’t mean to do any harm. I apologize if I spoke hastily. It was an unfortunate happening, that was all.

‘Yours, R. K.’

‘I’m afraid even that won’t make matters right,’ she said ruefully. ‘Anyone else would understand, but to Rhoda everything I do is wrong. But it’s the least I can say. I’ll take it across to the school; a walk in the wind may help to steady me. I still feel shaky. But I shan’t ask to see her. It would be too hard on us both. It’s too soon.’

She slipped on a mackintosh and cap and turned to the garden door. The door from the Squirrel House opened at the same moment, and Gail looked in.

‘Are you going out? It’s fearfully windy—a howling gale again, like we had in the night. This jolly well is “Gales Corner” to-day! Oh, Rosamund! Is it finished? You’ve taken it off the loom! Oh, let me see it, Ros!’

Rosamund reddened and then grew white. ‘You’ve seen it often enough, Gail Ann. It doesn’t look any different because—because the last inch is done!’ She stumbled in her words, and turned away hastily. ‘Keep that door shut while I open this one, or you’ll blow the Squirrels into the road!’

‘Is anything the matter, Ros?’ Gail cried.

But Rosamund had opened the door, and in the gust of wind her answer was unheard. She dragged the door shut behind her and set off across the garden, her lips quivering.

‘Doesn’t look any different! What made me say that? But it was the natural thing to say. It’s going to be very difficult! Gail will never feel the same to Rhoda, if she knows, and I don’t want that to happen. Gail would never forgive her, and the others would find out. They’d take it badly. It’s horrible that Maid’s frock should be ruined, but it isn’t as serious as that—as it would seem to Gail, or to Tamzine and Sonia. I can’t have them all down on Rhoda—poor kid! Could I smuggle the silk out of the house? Well, of course, I can say I’m taking it to Maid. But they’ll think me very odd, if I don’t show it to them. I think the girls expect me to hold a sort of reception to display the finished piece! It is going to be very awkward!’

She fought her way against the wind, and the gale helped to clear her mind. At the school door she paused. ‘Rhoda might like to send a message. In her place I’d want to say something. I’d better give her the chance.’

After some hesitation she asked the maid to fetch Miss Durrant. When Lisabel appeared, in much astonishment, Rosamund slipped the letter into her hand. ‘Liza, do this for me! You owe me some help with Rhoda. We’ve had a little trouble. Give her this note, and ask her to read it and to say if it’s all right. And don’t ask any questions of either of us, Lisabel!’

Lisabel looked at her. Then she took the letter and went off in silence.

It was several minutes before she returned, looking worried and still carrying the letter. ‘We can’t find Rhoda anywhere. No one has seen her since she went to practise at two o’clock. She isn’t in the music-room now. Rosamund, what has happened? Is anything the matter?’

Rosamund’s face was startled. ‘I don’t know! look here, Lisabel, Rhoda must be found. Make quite sure she’s not in the house before you say anything to Miss Rainey. She may be in her room——’

‘She isn’t. I went up there.’

‘Then she’s in the garden somewhere. You’d better come and help me to find her. We had a row, and she may have rushed off and fallen and hurt herself. Don’t tell the girls; it’s very wild, and they’d all want to search. Get all the help you can; the rest of the staff, and the gardeners. The grounds aren’t so very large; we ought to find her soon, unless——’ she paused.

‘Unless the silly infant has dashed off into the woods,’ Lisabel said bluntly. ‘It’s what I should have done; I wouldn’t stay in the garden, where I’d be found in no time! Did you upset her very badly?’

‘Apparently I did.’ Rosamund’s lips had pinched. ‘Search the grounds, Lisabel, and send the men into the woods. I’ll go straight to the common; it’s the worst place. Send one of the

men after me. She wouldn't take much harm in the woods, the trees are so thick; but I don't like that common in a gale. If she's there, the sooner she's found the better. I'll get along at once. Give me back that letter. Thanks!' And she raced away, out into the storm alone.

CHAPTER 19. ADAM AND EVE

Crouching under a bank on the common, Rhoda realized that she dared not move; that even if she lay still, she was in danger of injury, perhaps of losing her life.

A top-heavy pine close by was swaying ominously.

It had all happened so suddenly. Two hours ago she had been practising in the music-room, working at some difficult arpeggios. Then had come the sudden impulse—the scene in Rosamund's room—her burst of temper and Rosamund's answering anger—that terrible moment when the table gave way behind her, and the ghastly sight of the ink on the silver dress—and her wild flight through the garden.

Now she seemed a thousand miles from school and safety, a hundred years from the girl who had been so angry. That black stain seemed to have changed the world. There was no way back to shelter; she dared not move from her refuge for fear that tree fell and crushed her as she ran. She felt it already, in her mind; the awful weight of the trunk on her back.

It swayed again and came crashing down. Rhoda gasped and sobbed, and shrank against the wall of sand. It was not the first tree to fall. She had heard another, and the sound had driven her in terror into this nook.

Was it safe to stay? She tried to see, through the branches of the fallen giant, and shuddered at sight of another just overhead.

'If that one comes down I don't believe the bank will keep it off. I shall have to try—oh, I daren't! Oh, if somebody would come!—What was that?'

It was her name, called clearly, over and over again.

'Rhoda! Rhoda Kane! Rhoda! Are you here?'

'Here! I'm here! Oh, come and help me!' Rhoda sobbed. 'Help!'

She fought her way through the tangle of branches, and struggled out, scratched and breathless, to meet the distant figure. With someone to give her courage, to see if she fell, she could brave the danger of the trees.

'Who told you? Oh, it's you! Oh, why did you come?' she panted, facing Rosamund, with wild, unbelieving eyes.

'Thought you might be here. Come on! The sooner we're back in the garden the better. I went to the house,' Rosamund explained. 'I'd written a note; here, take it!' She thrust the letter into Rhoda's hand. 'They couldn't find you; they're searching the grounds. I remembered this place, and it's the worst, so I came to see if you were here. Take this path; it's the quickest way. I'll go first, if you don't mind. Then I can see if it's all right. Keep close to me.'

'Do you mean it's more dangerous to go first?' Rhoda called, through the noise of the wind and trees.

'Well——! I can see if I think anything unpleasant is going to come down and brain us.'

Rhoda struggled to keep close behind her, her mind whirling as wildly as the trees above. Rosamund had spoken as if no hideous accident lay between them. What did she mean?

'One moment, Rhoda!' Rosamund had stopped. 'That great brute looks unsteady. No, I think it's all right. Come on—run!'

They dashed across an open danger-space. As they reached the path again Rhoda tripped and fell.

‘Oh! Oh—Rosamund!’

‘Hurt? Where?’ Rosamund was kneeling beside her in an instant. ‘Can’t you get up? No, lie still!’ she shouted, and flung herself on top of Rhoda.

The earth shook, as the great tree she had seen fell with a crash. For several seconds both girls lay silent, breathless and stunned with the noise.

Then Rosamund said cheerfully: ‘That’s what I was expecting. Are you all right? It didn’t touch me, though I don’t know how it missed—I say, Rhoda! What’s up?’

The tree lay very close to them, and Rhoda had not spoken. Now she struggled to answer, while Rosamund pushed away the twigs and branches that had covered them.

‘I’m sorry. I felt queer for a minute. I’m afraid—it caught my foot——’ her voice broke.

Rosamund sprang up with an exclamation. ‘You poor kid! I’ll—oh, Rhoda, my dear! I can’t move the thing. It’s too heavy. Can you bear it? One of the men will be here soon. I told them to come.’

She was pushing frantically at the big tree bole, which lay across Rhoda’s foot. But all her efforts were not enough to move it an inch.

‘I can’t!’ she gasped. ‘It’s no use. We’ll have to wait. With help I could do it, but not alone. Can you bear it, Rhoda?’

Rhoda set her teeth. ‘I can, if I don’t move. I’m numb. Rosamund, I won’t faint again. But you’d better get out of this. Another tree may come down. Look at that one!’

‘I see it. It’s one of the two very big ones. Gail calls them Adam and Eve. Our friend who came first was Adam.’ Rosamund tried to speak lightly, for the possibility that Eve, in falling, might kill both her and Rhoda was only too plain.

‘Won’t it come right on top of us, if it falls too?’ Rhoda also had seen the danger and had understood.

‘Looks rather like it, but you can never tell. It might fall a few feet to one side. Don’t look at it, Rhoda; it won’t do any good. We shan’t have any doubt of it if it does come down.’

Rhoda gripped her arm. ‘Aren’t you going for help, to move this awful thing that’s holding me?’

‘I’ve sent for help; I can’t do any more. If I go to meet the man I may miss him. I’ll help more by being here and guiding him by shouting.’

‘Yes, but—but if that tree falls you’ll be killed too,’ Rhoda panted. ‘I can’t go, but you can. You aren’t kept here by anything.’

‘No?’ Rosamund questioned. ‘I rather thought I was. Don’t be silly, Rhoda!’

‘You mustn’t stay just for me! ‘Rhoda cried, with fierce energy because the thought of being left alone was so horrible. ‘You must go—you ought to go! You can’t help me by staying!’

‘I’m sorry. I thought perhaps I could, just by being company. But anyway, I’m not going, so you’ll have to put up with me. Don’t worry, Rhoda; the gardener may come in a minute or two.’

‘But he may not,’ Rhoda almost sobbed. ‘You ought to go! You could be off this wretched common and safe in the house in five minutes. Rosamund, do go!’

‘Go away and be nice and safe, and leave you lying in this very nasty spot, unable to move? Thank you, Rhoda Kane! You needn’t be insulting.’

There was silence, while Rhoda lay with her arm thrown across her face. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered at last. ‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘Would you go, if I had been caught by the tree instead? Would you go back to school and be safe, and leave me, not knowing whether it would be five minutes or an hour? Would you, Rhoda?’

‘No, I—I hope I wouldn’t. I’d want to stay. I hope I’d be brave enough. But you—you matter more than I do,’ and Rhoda reached out and gripped Rosamund’s arm again. ‘I’m only a girl, but you—you ought to think of Uncle Geoffrey, and all that your life means. Rosamund, you ought to go. You don’t belong to yourself now.’

‘That’s true,’ Rosamund said quietly. She was hard at work, breaking off the spiky twigs which lay across Rhoda’s body and were causing her discomfort which she had not had time to realize. ‘But Geoffrey would want me to stand by you; I know him well enough for that. Not because you’re his niece, but because you’re a person who’s been hurt. He’d never expect me to leave anybody who was in a hole like this.’

‘Can’t I say anything that will make you go?’ Rhoda wailed.

‘I’m afraid not; so suppose you don’t trouble any more. I must see you through; you know I must, so why make a fuss? It might just as well be the other way, and you’d have stood by me. It’s just chance that I escaped.’

‘You wouldn’t be here at all, but for me.’ Rhoda broke down and cried helplessly.

‘That’s true, of course. I shouldn’t choose to walk on this common in a gale, just for the fun of the thing. Didn’t you know it was a bad place in a high wind? I told Rosalie.’

‘I didn’t hear; no, I didn’t know, really I didn’t. I didn’t know it was any worse than anywhere else. Why are the trees falling so badly here?’ Rhoda asked unsteadily.

Rosamund explained about the top-heavy pines with their spreading heads, and about the cutting-down of the wood which had protected the common.

‘There can’t be many left standing,’ Rhoda groaned, as a crash not far away told that another veteran had fallen.

Rosamund glanced at the swaying tree above them. She almost wished it would come down and end the suspense. Every second she was expecting the smashing thunder of its fall. ‘That man’s taking a long time to follow me.’

At something in her voice, Rhoda uncovered her face to look at her. She saw Eve swinging in a sudden blast, and understood the danger.

‘Rosamund! Aren’t you frightened?’ she cried.

‘Just a little,’ Rosamund said, very quietly. ‘I hope if it does fall on us, it will do the job thoroughly. I’d rather be killed outright.’

Rhoda’s imagination gave her a glimpse of the other possibility; of a crippled life, of years of helplessness—ghastly for herself, but what about Rosamund, with her marriage coming within a year?

‘Oh, Rosamund, please go! *Please!*’ she moaned. ‘I’d rather bear it alone than be afraid for you!’

Rosamund bent and kissed her. ‘You brave girl! I can’t do it, of course; but I love you for saying it.’

Rhoda gripped her hand with a sob. ‘You are a brick! Rosamund, I’ve been hateful. Will you ever forgive me for spoiling your lovely work? I really didn’t mean it.’

‘Oh, I know that! It was a pure accident. You mustn’t think any more about it——’

‘Do you mean that?’ Rhoda cried. ‘I didn’t mean to do it, but it was my fault. It was my temper; I was so angry that I didn’t care. It wasn’t quite an accident, Rosamund.’

‘Oh, yes, it was. You didn’t mean to do it. We’ll forget it, Rhoda.’

‘It’s not right you should be the one to insist it was an accident!’ Rhoda said unsteadily.

‘Oh, I think it is! It’s natural you should blame yourself. I felt so sorry, as soon as I had time to think; I came after you as fast as I could. I hope I didn’t say anything too unkind just at first? It was such a shock to us both; I’ve been terribly afraid I’d said too much. Why, what’s the matter, Rhoda?’

‘You!’ Rhoda whispered. ‘Your queer way of looking at it. You’re so generous—but so odd! You aren’t saying it just because of—of that tree? For fear it’s going to fall on us?’

Rosamund glanced up at Eve, in spite of her own advice. Then she bent deliberately over Rhoda, to shield her from what was coming.

‘No, it’s not because of Eve. I like to be odd, but I’m sorry you think of it as odd. I came after you to tell you how I felt. It’s all in the letter. You’ll read it——’

‘Oh, it’s coming right on top of us!’ Rhoda shrieked.

Then the earth shook as Eve crashed down and fell on top of Adam.

Rhoda, shaken and terrified, rubbed the dust from her eyes. The great trunk had not touched them. It lay across the one which had fallen first, propped up a foot from the ground.

‘Rosamund?’ she whispered.

But Rosamund lay stretched on the pine needles and did not move.

Rhoda gave a terrible cry. ‘It’s killed her! And it’s for me! She’s dead! Oh—oh, help! Oh, come here! *Here!*’

A shout answered her, and the gardener came running up.

‘Eh, missy! This is a bad pickle you’re in——’

‘Help Rosamund!’ Rhoda said fiercely. ‘Don’t touch me; see to her. Is she dead? Miss Kane—here, look! That tree didn’t touch her when it fell; I know it didn’t. She can’t be dead! See to her, can’t you?’

‘Maybe a branch knocked her down,’ the man was kneeling by Rosamund.

‘She bent over me, to save me. I can’t move; my foot is caught. Can’t you help her?’ Rhoda lay back, covering her face and fighting her tears.

She would not break down before the man. But in that moment she knew an absolute agony of suspense, for Rosamund’s sake.

‘Just a blow from a branch, I think,’ the man began. ‘I’ll have to fetch help, to carry the two of you. I’ll get a hurdle, and somebody else. You’ll be all right now. There’s no other tree near enough to touch you, missy.’

‘Can’t you carry her?’ Rhoda urged. ‘I can wait. If you leave me here, couldn’t you carry her? She ought to be attended to at once. She isn’t dead, is she?’

‘I’m all right.’ Rosamund raised herself on her elbows and rested her head on her hands. ‘I heard you talking, but I couldn’t get a word out. My head’s buzzy; did something hit me? Is Rhoda all right?’ she asked sharply, as her mind grew clearer.

‘Oh, you aren’t dead! I thought you were killed!’ Rhoda sobbed.

Rosamund sat up, with a shaky laugh. ‘We aren’t either of us killed, apparently, though I don’t know how we escaped. Oh, yes, I see! Eve fell on top of Adam; he saved us. Good of him! I suppose one of the branches caught me and flung me down, and the shock sent me silly for a moment.’

‘All right now, Miss Rosamund?’ the man asked anxiously.

‘Quite, thanks. I say, Wilkie, we must get Lady Rhoda out of this.’ Rosamund was her brisk, business-like self again. ‘You’d better fetch that hurdle before we touch her. We’re in no danger now; the worst has happened! Nothing will come near us, since those two big horrors are down. I’m afraid her foot may be crushed; I hope it isn’t broken. It will be better to carry her lying flat. Bring somebody to help with the hurdle, if you can. I might let my end down; I shall be a bit shaky when I walk, I expect. Run now, like a good lad, and be as quick as you can! We’ll be all right here for a few minutes more.’

‘It’s the best thing to do,’ Wilkie agreed, and set off across the common again. He did not like those narrow paths among the trees, but he knew that the girls could not be left there any longer than was necessary—and one of them a ‘ladyship’ apparently!

‘Oh, Rosamund! I thought you were dead!’ Rhoda sobbed.

‘You poor kid! You had a bad fright,’ Rosamund exclaimed. ‘Rhoda, my dear, I’m all right, and nothing more will happen now. Let’s be quiet for a few minutes, till the men come back. We’ve had a difficult time, but it’s all over. Just lie still and wait.’

She sat leaning against the fallen trees, supporting Rhoda’s head and shoulders in her lap.

Rhoda gave a long sigh and lay still.

‘Is your foot very sore?’ Rosamund asked. ‘You haven’t said a word; you’ve been very plucky. But it must be hurting you.’

‘It isn’t too bad, but I don’t want it touched. If I don’t move I can bear it.’

‘I’m afraid it will be bad when the men lift you, old girl. I’ll do my best to help you through.’

Rhoda gave an unsteady attempt at a laugh. ‘You’ll help, if anybody can. Rosamund, is it true?’

‘That we aren’t deadly enemies any more, do you mean?’

‘That you don’t loathe me for being such a pig.’

‘You weren’t a pig; it was very natural. I knew how you felt, and I was terribly sorry about it. I wanted you to like me.’

‘And instead I nearly killed you.’

‘Oh, no! I did that myself. I chose to come. I knew what it would be like out here; you didn’t know.’

‘You came to save me,’ Rhoda whispered. ‘You came, although I’d been so horrible. And I ruined your lovely work.’

‘You needn’t worry any more about that! If I tell Maidlin that because her dress is spoilt we have made friends, she’ll say: “Oh, I’m glad! Bother the dress! It’s worth it.” Yes, she will. She knows how much I’ve wanted you.’

‘She must be nearly as jolly as you,’ Rhoda said.

Her voice was very tired, and she lay quietly in Rosamund’s arms.

‘Rest for a few minutes, Rhoda,’ Rosamund said gently. ‘I want to be quiet and think.’

CHAPTER 20. RHODA'S REQUEST

'How is Miss Kane this morning?' Miss Rainey entered the paved courtyard of the Squirrel House, and put the question to Elspeth, who came out to greet her.

'Oh, quite all right, thank you!'

'How is Rhoda, Miss Rainey?' Rosamund came out of the cottage. 'There's nothing the matter with me; I had a hot bath and slept off the effects of yesterday. I've a few bruises, but that's all. I'm afraid you can't say the same for Rhoda, poor child. But the foot isn't broken, is it?'

'No, but it's badly crushed. She hasn't slept well and is very restless. She keeps asking if she may see you. Would it be possible for you to come?'

'I'll come back with you at once,' Rosamund said willingly.

The gale had blown itself out in the night, and the day was quiet and fine. Only the leaves and twigs strewn on the lawn, and the wreckage on the common, were left as reminders of the storm.

As Rosamund and Miss Rainey walked together towards the school, the headmistress exclaimed: 'I wish there was something we could do to thank you for the ready help you gave us yesterday, Miss Kane! We are most grateful. It was a very brave act.'

'You can do something,' Rosamund cut her short, laughing and flushing. 'You could let me use your telephone. It's much nearer than the village callbox, and I want to ring up Rhoda's uncle and tell him the story.'

'Oh, please use it whenever you wish! We shall be delighted. Are things likely to be any happier between you and Rhoda?'

'Yes, that will be all right. We settled our differences under Adam and Eve—the big trees that fell on us, you know.'

'It's a wonder you weren't both killed, my dear! I'm glad to hear Rhoda has come to her senses; I hoped it was so, when she seemed eager to see you, but I thought I would ask you, rather than her.'

'I was glad she fainted when we moved that tree,' Rosamund said gravely. 'I was afraid the pain of being carried would be too much for her. She's plucky, but she had put up with a good deal already. I was glad she didn't have to bear any more for a little while.'

Miss Rainey led the way to a bedroom which had been set apart for cases of slight illness. 'We thought it better not to put Rhoda with her companions last night. She, and they, were over-excited, and there would have been too much talking. She has been quieter here.'

'So you aren't a Kingfisher any more!'

Rosamund greeted Rhoda gaily from the doorway. 'Oh—Rosamund! Oh, how good of you to come!' Rhoda started up in bed, flinging back her dark plaits.

'You poor kiddy! Have you had a very bad night?' Rosamund bent over her. 'How is the foot? Very sore?'

'The doctor says I won't be able to use it for some time. It's horribly bruised, and he thinks a little bone may be broken somewhere. I'm to keep it still. That means staying in bed. Rosamund, could I come and stay with you?' Rhoda cried.

‘With me? At the Squirrel? Would you really like to?’ Rosamund’s face lit up in eager delight. ‘But what would Miss Rainey say?’

‘She’ll say no, but I thought you could talk to her. If I can’t go to classes, what’s the use of being at school? And so much of our work is out of doors. The doctor could come to see me just as well there as here,’ Rhoda urged. ‘If I’m to have a slack time, I’d like to be with somebody of my own family.’

Rosamund reddened. ‘Rhoda Kane, do you mean that? About me, I mean? That you feel now I’m like one of your own family?’

‘You know I do. You’re nearly my aunt,’ Rhoda cried, with something between a laugh and a sob. ‘If I’m ill at school, I’m sure my aunt ought to invite me to stay with her!’

‘Your aunt! Horrors! I suppose I shall be your aunt! What an awful thought!’ Rosamund teased. ‘It’s nearly as bad as Elspeth and me!’

‘As Elspeth’s your aunt, she must be very elderly, compared with me,’ Rhoda retorted. ‘Will you have me, Rosamund? I don’t need any nursing; I only have to lie still. Nurse could come and look at my foot, if she wants to. It’s so stale here alone!’

‘But in a day or two they’ll let you be carried downstairs, and then you’ll be with the other girls. Wouldn’t you find the Squirrel very dull?’

‘I should love it!’ Rhoda pleaded. ‘Let me come for a few days! I want to get to know you, Rosamund.’

‘That’s a big argument,’ Rosamund said quietly. ‘I’ll speak to Miss Rainey.’

‘She’ll do anything for you, because you saved my life yesterday.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that! The man might have found you in plenty of time. Don’t think about yesterday, Rhoda. It’s all done with, except your foot, and that will soon be well.’

‘Oh, it’s not done with!’ and Rhoda caught her breath in a sob. ‘I’ve read your letter. Your lovely work! I can’t bear to think of it.’

‘Then Maidlin will have to come to the Squirrel and tell you it doesn’t matter.’

‘What did Gail say?’ Rhoda whispered. ‘And Elspeth? Don’t they loathe me?’

‘They don’t know. I flung the thing into a box and locked it, and it’s still there. What’s the good of telling anybody?’

Rhoda stared at her. ‘You aren’t going to let people know? Not Tamzine and Sonny? Or—or the Head?’

‘It’s nothing to do with them. Maidlin is the only one who needs to know; and her friends, of course, for they are expecting her to wear the dress. But they need only know I had an accident to the material when it was nearly finished,’ Rosamund said.

Rhoda turned and hid her face in the pillow. ‘You—you’ll keep it dark—and let them think you were careless! And to shield me! Why are you so generous?’

‘Because I’m so glad we aren’t enemies any longer,’ Rosamund said, speaking lightly of set purpose. ‘I’ve been unhappy for months, because you and your mother didn’t like me. Will she feel any better about me now? Or won’t she approve of your being friends, Rhoda?’

‘It’s going to make all the difference to Mother that you came after me, and stayed with me when it was so risky. I shall write, so that she’ll understand,’ Rhoda said eagerly. ‘She must know that you knew all about the danger, though I didn’t; I shall explain it all. Rosamund, I want to own up! I—I wrote a dreadful letter to Mother last Sunday! I’m so sorry now; I wish I could get it back,’ she whispered.

Rosamund flushed. ‘That was after you’d found me out; after our midnight meeting. You were feeling very bad, and you wanted to tell her. It was natural, though I wish you hadn’t

done it.'

'Oh, I wish I hadn't! But I'll put it right; she'll know how I feel now, when she reads the letter I'm going to write.'

'Don't pile it on too thickly!' Rosamund laughed unsteadily. 'But I'd like her to love me a little. And I want her to know how anxious I am to be friendly with the whole family.'

'It'll tell her. She wouldn't have liked to lose me, too, so soon after losing Geoff.'

'You're all she has now. I'm glad you aren't lying under Adam and Eve on the common!'

'So am I!' Rhoda laughed and cried together. 'But it's your doing that I'm not.'

'It'll go and interview Miss Rainey,' Rosamund said. 'She won't want to let you out of her sight.'

She was back in a few minutes, and sitting on Rhoda's bed she told her plans. 'I had a job with the Head, but I won! I'm going back to make things ready for you. You shall have a bed in my back room, where the loom stands; Gail and I can easily arrange that. Then you'll be near to everybody and to the garden and the bathroom. Did you know I have a bathroom? I'm so proud of it!'

Rhoda laughed. 'Why shouldn't you have a bathroom?'

'It isn't usual in cottages as small as ours. Gail and Elspeth have to keep on good terms with me, because the bath is mine! You'll soon be able to hop about on one foot, but you mustn't attempt stairs for some time. I'd like to give you my pretty blue room, but the stair is narrow and very steep and you'd find it difficult. You shall have the lower room, and when the girls come to Gail's Corner for ices and sweets they can come along to have a chat with you. Miss Rainey will allow that; but they'll be on their honour not to go through to the Squirrel House, in case Elspeth has people in for tea. Lisabel Durrant and Wylie will carry you across to us to-morrow.'

'I want to come at once! How did you manage to persuade Miss Rainey?' Rhoda cried.

'I can be very tactful!' Rosamund assured her, with grave face and dancing eyes; but she did not explain the plea which had really won the headmistress's consent.

'Rhoda wants to know me better, Miss Rainey. That seems to me the biggest thing that has happened or is likely to happen to her this term, and the most important for the rest of her life,' she had said soberly. 'I hope you'll help us by letting me have her. If we are real friends, I can do so much for her later on. She isn't thinking of that, but I am. I want to mean so much to her that all her fears of her mother and herself being pushed into the background will vanish. I shan't really want to represent the family, except when I must. The Earl will never be very strong, and we shall live quietly in the country; it's the life I prefer, in any case. There will be plenty for Rhoda and Lady Verriton to do; and it will be very much easier for us all if the family is united. Rhoda's wish to come to me at the Squirrel means more than I can say. So may I have her?'

'I can't refuse, in the circumstances,' Miss Rainey had said. 'I agree that all this matters far more to Rhoda than gardening or learning to clean her car or to attend to her dogs. She may come to you to-morrow, if the doctor gives permission.'

'Isn't it giving you a fearful lot of bother?' Rhoda asked wistfully, as Rosamund outlined her plans.

'Not a bit too much. I'd have liked to give up my pretty front room to you—downstairs, you know. But in wet weather we have to use it for customers, for lunch or tea, so Gail and I have our meals with Elspeth in her big room; she has one nice room and a kitchen, as I have, but my kitchen is my working and weaving-room as well, and hers is always full of cooking

things, and dishes waiting to be washed. So you'd better not sleep in my big room, for fear it's needed, but you'll use it during the day and hobble out if people come. If you're at all nervous of sleeping downstairs, Gail will make a bed on the floor, to be near you.'

'Oh, I shan't be nervous! I shall love it!'

'It will be like camping out, you know,' Rosamund warned her. 'After the palatial halls of Kentisbury, you must expect to find the Rose and Squirrel just a little cramped.'

'I shall love camping out,' Rhoda said, laughing.

'Then that's settled; you'll come to-morrow. Now I'm going to Miss Rainey's study to ring up Geoffrey and tell him about our adventure with Adam and Eve.'

'Tell him I'm sorry,' Rhoda exclaimed, reddening. 'Tell him I'm glad about you. Say I know you'll be a lovely aunt and—and a very jolly Countess. And give him my love, Rosamund.'

'I'll give him the whole of your message,' Rosamund promised, and went to the telephone, her face very bright and full of contentment.

CHAPTER 21. RHODA'S VISITORS

Rhoda's first two days in the Rose House were very quiet, by the doctor's orders. But there were books to read—among them school stories by a friend with whom Rosamund had lived for years. At first Rhoda murmured politely that she did not care for school stories, but she sampled one, as it was written by a friend, and was interested and asked for more.

'I'd like to have a party for the girls,' she said, on the first evening. 'Would your Aunt Elspeth let me invite six of them to tea? It's her business to give teas to people, so it would be helping her, wouldn't it?'

Rosamund laid down the supper tray, and looked at her and laughed. 'Do you mean to ask them as a business proposition?'

'Of course. I couldn't let her give tea to a crowd. I want all the Robins and the other two Kingfishers. Would she do it for me?'

'I'm sure she'd be delighted; have as many parties as you like! The Kingfishers—that means Tamzine and Sonia, doesn't it? And the Robins? I'm not quite sure who they are?'

'Rosalie and Daffodil, and Robin and Gwyneth.'

'Oh, the girls from Quellyn! Tamzine told me. I'd like to know them. You'll invite me, won't you?'

'If you're good!' Rhoda retorted.

Rosamund laughed in delight. There had been a trying moment when Rhoda's eyes fell on the loom, standing near her camp bed. She had looked at Rosamund piteously, and Rosamund had flung the dust-sheet over the clumsy contrivance.

'Don't look at the ghost! You shall sit all day in the other room,' she said cheerily.

The front room was very pretty, full of sunshine most of the day; the little tables had bright yellow cloths, the walls were deep yellow, the curtains brown, and there were yellow chrysanthemums in brown pots on the mantelpiece. A broad divan against the wall made a day-bed for Rhoda, and she looked round at the water-colour paintings and the framed photographs, and asked to be told about them all.

'My old home; where I lived from the time I was fifteen till I was twenty-two,' Rosamund explained. 'It's Lady Marchwood's house, and these are her twin girls; they're to be my bridesmaids next summer.'

'It's a lovely place,' said Rhoda, who knew all about lovely places, in that sense.

'I love it. And here is the Abbey, in the grounds.'

'Ros!' Rhoda looked up shyly. 'May I call you that? Gail does sometimes.'

'If you really want to. But I like Rosamund better.'

'I do, too,' Rhoda agreed. 'But I didn't want to feel I was less friendly than Gail.'

'Just now and then we can be Ros and Rho, to show there's no ill-feeling,' Rosamund said seriously. 'But for ordinary use we won't spoil our names. Yours is so pretty.'

'I like yours much better. I'm glad you're one of the family Roses; and you have the family looks, too. I've always felt sore that I haven't,' Rhoda confessed.

'Oh, don't worry about that! I should be glad to be a change in the family, if I were you. It would be very monotonous if all the girls were fair! Are you like your mother?'

Rhoda admitted that that was the explanation. ‘Rosamund, I’d like to see your brother. You don’t call him Geoffrey, do you?’

‘Too many Geoffreys about! He’s Roderick Geoffrey, so I call him Roddy. Of course you must see him! I’ll send for him.’

‘Where is his mother?’

Rosamund’s face darkened. ‘In India, thanks be! She’s found another man to marry her and give her a good time. That’s all she cares about.’

‘Oh! But—but how long is it since your father died? Isn’t Roddy only a year old?’

‘A year and eight months. It’s not two years yet; Father died just before Christmas, and this is September.’

‘And she’s married again already? Oh, how horrible!’

‘She’s a little cat.’ Rosamund lowered her voice. ‘Don’t talk about Eleanor; she’s Elspeth’s sister. Elspeth loathes her, and so do I, so we don’t talk about her. I had a job to get Roddy out of her hands; but considering what she is I simply had to have him. She’d have ruined him in six months. I’m his guardian, now.’

‘I am glad you took him away from her! You’ll bring him up decently.’

‘I’m doing my best. I’d better run over and see him to-morrow. You won’t mind if I leave you for a few hours? Elspeth and Gail will look after you.’

‘How do you go?’ Rhoda asked.

‘I ring up Verriton and the car comes for me. When you’re able to hop about we’ll go for a day, and Geoffrey shall come and spend the day with us,’ Rosamund promised.

She went off early next morning, after a few minutes’ urgent telephoning to Verriton and the Hall, from Miss Rainey’s study. By three o’clock the car brought her back, and Rhoda gave an astonished cry as she looked from the window, for Rosamund was walking through the Squirrel garden with a jumping, excited baby in her arms.

‘There, Auntie Rhoda! There’s a fine big boy for you!’

‘Oh, Rosamund, what a topping kid!’ Rhoda cried. ‘He’s just like you and all the rest! There are pictures of Geoff as a baby; Roddy’s quite like them.’

‘That’s rather jolly.’ Rosamund leaned over the back of a chair and watched her playing with the child. ‘He loves to come here. His Nanny is going to have tea in the Squirrel and then take him home. I’m glad you like him.’

Roddy had a great deal to say, though much of it was hard to understand. Rosamund translated his funny little attempts at words, and Rhoda laughed and marvelled.

‘How do you know what he means? It doesn’t sound like anything to me!’

‘I taught him when he began to speak. I know what he’s trying to say.’

Rhoda watched her with Roderick, as she gave him his tea at a little table. Suddenly she burst out:

‘You’re wonderful with him! I hope he won’t have the title after Uncle Geoffrey!’

Rosamund gave her a startled look. ‘Poor Roddy! Why not?’

‘Because you ought to have some of your own. You’re like a mother with him. I hope you’ll have a boy of your own.’

Rosamund’s colour rose. ‘At first I thought—but now—I don’t know. Perhaps it may happen. But I’ve been Roddy’s mother, in any case; I’ve had him.’

‘But I want you to have some of your own.’

Rosamund laughed. ‘Time enough! It’s a long way off. But since you’ve given your consent to my marriage, I’ll see what I can do to oblige you. I say, Rhoda! Somebody else met

me at Verriton and came in the car to see you.'

'Who is it? Uncle?'

'No, he's in London. Somebody who is talking to Gail and Elspeth; they're great chums. Hold this boy! If I leave him he'll be up to some wickedness, and you can't go to the rescue.'

She dumped Roderick on Rhoda's lap and went to the door of the Rose House.

'Maid! Maidie!' she called.

'Oh! She's the one—it was her dress!' Rhoda gasped, starting up in dismay.

'She knows all about it. She isn't heart-broken,' Rosamund said calmly. 'Don't drop Roddy! And don't shriek; there's no need to make Gail ask questions.'

Rhoda, scarlet, looked at the girl who came from the Squirrel House; a slim little girl, smaller than herself, though several years older. Maidlin was a year younger than Rosamund, and very dark, with big black eyes and black coils of hair. Her smile was shy and doubtful, as she came up to Rhoda's couch.

'I'm so sorry you've felt so bad about my frock! Of course I'm sorry the accident happened to it, but more on Rosamund's account than my own. It had meant so much work for her. But I'd said from the first that the dress would be too fine for me. Has she told you what we've decided?'

Rhoda had hidden her face in Roderick's yellow curls. 'It's jolly of you to be so kind, but I feel awful,' she groaned. 'And I feel worse because Rosamund won't tell people it was my fault. Gail and Elspeth know something happened, but they don't know I had anything to do with it. I want to tell them, but she keeps stopping me.'

'Oh, but it was an accident!' Maidlin said earnestly. 'You must think of it as an accident. Nobody was to blame. Ros says she startled you and made you jump, so it was really her own fault.'

'Oh, she shouldn't say it! Do you believe her when she talks rot?'

Rosamund rescued Roderick, who was shouting: 'Tea! Yoddy want tea!'

'Come and have your tea, young man! Tell Rhoda what I'm going to do, Maid.'

'She's going to weave me an everyday frock,' Maidlin explained. 'I'd a thousand times rather have a silk and wool, that I can wear all through the winter, than a gold and silver gorgeous thing that would only be useful for evening concerts. I shall have far more good of it.'

'Oh, how splendid!' Rhoda looked up, her face aglow. 'What a marvellous idea! Will she really do another for you? And you'll wear it every day?'

'Every single day, if it's as pretty as some of the pieces I've seen.'

'It's going to be,' Rosamund said, holding a cup for Roderick to drink his milk. 'You must decide what colour you want. The white silk warp I've been using will do, so your winter frock will be a twin of the gold and silver one. If I throw a pretty blue or orange or scarlet wool across the white, it won't be too vivid; it will be shot with silver, and the effect will be lovely.'

'It sounds lovely,' Maidlin agreed. 'Honestly, Ros, I shall love it more than an evening dress. Didn't I say from the first that the other was too fine for me?'

'You did. You also said it would be too showy. But I thought in the Queen's Hall you could wear it.'

'I shall have a very simple little white frock. I'm only a beginner; that dress was fit for a prima donna, wasn't it, Rhoda?'

'You'd have looked lovely in it, with your dark hair and eyes,' Rhoda sighed.

‘You’re fairly dark yourself. It seems odd that you are Rosamund’s cousin, and Roddy’s.’ Maidlin looked at the thick dark plaits that lay on Rhoda’s shoulders.

‘When she told you about your dress, what did you say?’ Rhoda asked shyly.

‘She told me first that you and she had made friends, and I was so very glad that I couldn’t be really sorry about anything.’ Maidlin sat on the edge of the couch and spoke very earnestly. ‘I have cousins myself, two of them, younger than I am, and they hated me terribly; they thought I’d neglected them, and I had never even heard about them. I felt so bad, and I’m so happy to have made friends with them, that I know how Rosamund has been feeling about you. Now that everything’s all right, why worry about an old dress?’

‘It isn’t only the dress. It’s all her work, and all the time, and her disappointment.’

‘I know,’ Maidlin assented. ‘But I love her for the time and work she’s spent on me, even if I never wear the dress. And you’ve more than made up for the disappointment.’

‘You two are awfully nice about it!’ Rhoda cried. ‘I don’t feel I can ever make up for a disappointment like that.’

‘We’re going to send the poor dress to town, to see what some very special cleaners can do with it,’ Rosamund said. ‘Maid can’t wear it for the concert; I won’t have her sing in a cleaned frock, though I know she’d do it if she thought I wanted her to, or if she believed it would make me feel better. But I won’t allow it. But it’s possible we might make something of the material, or of parts of it. We’ll see what can be done.’

‘If the stain comes out, I hope you’ll remember that the piece belongs to me,’ Maidlin said. ‘I believe I could have a baby frock made out of parts of it, for Madelon Marie—my French godchild,’ she explained to Rhoda.

‘Maid! It’s quite unsuitable for an infant!’ Rosamund cried.

‘I think so too. But Bidy won’t. She’d be hugely intrigued to dress Madelon in hand-woven silk.’

‘I believe you’re right. We’ll see what can be done.’

‘Maddy-Mahy! Want Maddy-Mahy!’ shouted Roderick, suddenly taking part in the conversation.

‘Madelon Marie is in France, my man. You can’t have her to-day,’ Rosamund said. ‘Had enough tea? Then what about going to look for Nanny and the car?’

‘Don’t want. Want stay here,’ said the future Earl.

‘“Want” is the one word he’s quite clear about! Ask Auntie Maid to sing you one little song before you go home!’

‘Want song, Auntie Maid!’

Sitting on the couch, Maidlin began to sing, quite simply, without accompaniment and without protest. When she paused, Rhoda exclaimed, wide-eyed:

‘It doesn’t matter what you wear, or if you don’t wear anything! If you sing like that, you’ll bring down the house!’

‘Oh, I hope not! Not Queen’s Hall! It would be such a shock to Sir Ivor Quellyn!’ Maidlin said seriously, but with laughing eyes. ‘And I think I’d better wear something, don’t you?’

‘It will be a shock to Sir Ivor, if you don’t,’ Rosamund retorted. ‘But Rhoda’s right. Once you open your mouth nobody will look at your frock. It’s a big voice for such a small person, isn’t it, Rhoda?’

‘It’s a gorgeous voice! I’d like to hear some more.’

‘Another time. Maid’s going back with Roddy now. She’s singing to-night at a village concert, so she mustn’t be late.’

‘Do you sing at village concerts? Oh, you shouldn’t! You ought to save your voice for London; for the Albert Hall!’

‘I don’t feel like that at all.’ Maidlin rose and stood looking down at her. ‘I belong to the village, and I must help them when they ask me. Queen’s Hall is quite an extra; I’m only singing there to please Sir Ivor, because he has teased so much about it. My Camp Fire Girls are giving a play at the Village Hall, and I have to sing.’

‘I’ve been reading about them. Won’t you tell me? Are you a Camp Fire Guardian?’

‘A splendid Guardian. But she’s going home now.’ Rosamund picked up Roderick. ‘You’re tired, my man! Come along, Auntie Maid!’

CHAPTER 22. ROSAMUND'S BRIDESMAIDS

Rhoda sat in the brown and gold room, ready to receive her visitors.

The first to come were Sonia and Tamzine. They stood at the door of her bedroom, on their way through from the garden, and gazed at their friend.

'Isn't it pretty? You look like a queen, Rho, among those golden cushions. They suit your eyes and hair,' Sonia cried.

Rhoda pushed back the loosely-braided plaits from her face. 'It's nice to see you again, Sonny. I've missed you and Tam.'

'It's marvellous to see you look all right, old girl.' Tamzine had been scanning Rhoda's face keenly. 'We've had the most ghastly pictures floating before our eyes of you lost on the common, and pine trees rattling down like ninepins on top of you. Are you really quite fit, except for your foot?'

'I'm all right now. I was tired and bruised at first, and I'm sure Rosamund was, though she wouldn't say so.'

Sonia sat on the edge of the couch and waited eagerly for more. 'It's all right now, Rho, isn't it? You look so much jollier, as if your inside mind had settled down.'

Rhoda reddened, but laughed in spite of herself. 'Did my inside mind show so plainly? I've been an idiot, though Rosamund won't agree; she says it was natural, and that so far as I knew I might have been quite right.'

'Robin Brent will approve of Rosamund,' said Tamzine. 'That's the sort of thing Robin said about Gwyneth, I believe.'

'The trouble was, I didn't try to know, and I didn't mean to know, what Rosamund was really like. That wasn't playing the game.' Rhoda had been thinking to some purpose during her quiet days.

Tamzine nodded; the honesty of the confession appealed to her. 'You're sporting, old thing. Here come the Robins!'

It was only Robin and Gwyneth, however. Gwyneth stood in the doorway and looked about the room, while Robin came quickly across to Rhoda.

'Are you really better? You must have had a dreadful time! May we hear about it now?'

'The school has been full of rumours,' Tamzine said. 'And Lisabel Durrant hasn't done anything to ease our minds. She wouldn't tell us a thing.'

'What a jolly room!' Gwyneth came in, still looking about her. 'May we see everything? What are the pictures? They're very good.'

Rosamund appeared at the front door, coming from the garden. 'I'm glad to hear you say so. You are the girl who lived with Quellyn, the artist, aren't you? You should know good work. These were house-warming presents to me, done by a friend; four were ordered specially for me by Joan Raymond—your aunt, Sonia!—and the others were gifts from the artist. This was my May-Queen picture; she gives each of our queens a painting when she is crowned. Oh, yes, I was a queen once! At my old school, when I was fifteen. There I am, in my robes and crown; and there's a group of the former queens, at my coronation.'

The girls crowded round the photos, with exclamations of delight and surprise.

‘We didn’t know we’d had Royalty to teach us “Put on Thy Smock” on the lawn,’ Sonia laughed.

‘I’ll teach you “The Queen’s Jig,” when Rhoda’s well enough to join in. Do you see the little dark girl with the big eyes, who is my maid of honour? That’s Maidlin di Ravarati, who is just coming out as a singer at the Queen’s Hall.’

‘The one who is to wear the lovely dress?’ cried Sonia.

Only Rosamund saw Rhoda grow white. The rest were looking at the photos.

‘Isn’t this the same girl? She looks like a queen here,’ Robin asked.

‘Yes, she was queen later on; Queen Primrose—she wore a primrose train. Mine was crimson, with big yellow roses; I was always a large, hefty person! Maid could wear dainty flowers and colours; I had to have stately ones. It was great fun; we go back every May-day and dress up for the new queen and make a procession; and then we dance—heaps of country-dances! Here come the missing Robins! I was beginning to wonder if they were confined to quarters for some mad act!’

Rosalie and Daffodil hurled themselves into the company. ‘Awfully jolly of you to ask us! We’ve been dying to come!’

‘But we had a little bother with Lisabel,’ Daffodil explained. ‘She said we’d left clippings all over the lawn and we must go and sweep them up.’

‘We told her we were going to a party, but she said tidy lawns came first,’ Rosalie grumbled.

Rosamund paused, turning back from the doorway.

‘My dear good children, who said you might call Miss Durrant Lisabel?’

‘Oh, well! You won’t give us away, will you?’

‘No, but you’ll do it when she can hear you,’ Rosamund retorted.

‘She wouldn’t mind. She knows we know her name.’

‘Don’t be too sure! I wouldn’t like to say what or when Lisabel would mind.’

‘There’s her temper, Rosalie, my love,’ said Tamzine.

In a corner, bending over the table of craftwork displayed for sale, Sonia was speaking in a low voice to Robin. ‘Robin, if one person saw the other one’s point of view for long enough, and steadily enough, would that do? Would it break down the other one’s prejudice? Tammy and I were talking about it. Or must both try to understand the other one?’

Robin gave her a quick, appreciative look. ‘You mean Rhoda and Rosamund? They’ve made friends, haven’t they? I’m so glad and thrilled about it, but I didn’t like to say anything. Rhoda looks so much jollier than I’ve ever seen her look.’

‘She’s herself, as she used to be a year ago, before she heard about Rosamund and the baby heir. What do you think, Robin? Can one person break down the other one’s prejudice by being kind and jolly?’

‘I think so. But it takes a long time, if the other person doesn’t help. Perhaps it needs something to happen to show the other person what—what is happening, in fact! With Gwyneth *fach* and me, there had to be the burglars who were after her pictures, and we had to save the pictures together, before she realized we were really friends. I suppose that adventure on the common showed Rhoda——’

‘I say, Rhoda! Tell us what happened under those big trees! Was that what made you friends with Rosamund? We nearly died, when we heard you were coming here,’ cried Daffodil.

‘Adam and Eve. Gail told us. What did you say to Rosamund? She saved your life, didn’t she?’ Rosalie added.

‘A bull—two bulls—in a china shop!’ sang Tamzine.

‘A whole herd of bulls would be nothing like as bad as you two, indeed!’ Gwyneth *fach* glared at Rosalie and Daffodil.

‘I don’t see! We only asked——’

‘We want to know! Rhoda needn’t go green. We only asked a question!’

Rhoda, very white, was sitting upright. ‘Gwyneth, please shut the door. I don’t want Gail to come in. Tamzine, will you shut the front door? I don’t want Rosamund either. Then come here, all of you.’

Startled by her manner, the girls closed the doors and crowded round the couch.

‘Are you going to tell us what happened?’ Daffodil dropped on the ground and gazed up at Rhoda, shaking back her hair and clasping her knees.

‘Oh, Rhoda, do! Tell us all about it!’ Rosalie whispered, and squatted beside her friend. ‘I’ve been awfully upset about you, but they wouldn’t let me come to say so, and we’d promised Rosamund not to do anything mad.’

‘Rosamund doesn’t want me to tell you,’ Rhoda began breathlessly. ‘I’ve tried to keep it in, to please her, but I can’t bear it. I can never come back to school with the rest of you unless you know what really happened.’

‘That’s the idea!’ Daffodil chuckled irrepressibly. ‘You couldn’t come back if you had a deadly secret. Don’t mind what Rosamund says!’

‘Why should she tell you what you’re to say?’ Rosalie agreed. ‘Even if she did save your life, Rho!’

‘Be quiet, you two!’ Tamzine’s voice was so full of authority and something more that the wild ones stared at her in amazement.

‘It’s something serious,’ Robin explained, with a look at Rhoda’s strained face. ‘You aren’t helping.’

‘Sorry!’ Daffodil muttered. ‘Didn’t understand!’

‘It wasn’t because Rosamund came to help me on that awful common that we made friends.’ Rhoda spoke hurriedly, her eyes on Tamzine and Sonia. ‘She was a perfect brick; she knew the danger of the trees, and yet she came after me. And then she stayed, when I couldn’t move; she could have made an excuse and said she was going for help, but she wouldn’t leave me, even when we saw the second tree was going to fall. It might have killed her or crippled her; she said she was afraid of that. But she wouldn’t go; she was absolutely splendid, and terribly brave. But even that wasn’t what made me—made me see what an idiot I’d been.’

She paused for breath. The four elder girls gazed down at her, and the juniors stared up from their lowly seats, all realizing now her deep earnestness.

Rhoda caught her breath; she was terribly afraid she would cry before them all.

‘That beautiful silver dress—it’s spoiled. It can’t be used. It’s all over ink. I did it.’ She hid her face and sat with quivering shoulders.

Unseen by the girls, Rosamund listened at the garden window, her lips tightly pressed, a gleam of admiration in her eyes.

Sonia gave a sob. ‘Oh—Rhoda!’

‘What did you do?’ Gwyneth whispered. She, of all the girls, could best enter into what Rhoda’s feelings had been.

‘Oh, you poor thing!’ Robin said gently. ‘How dreadful you must have felt!’

Tamzine put her arm round Rhoda. ‘Decent of you to tell us, old dear. How did it happen?’ The younger girls were staring, too stunned to speak.

‘It was half an accident,’ Rhoda said unsteadily. ‘Rosamund keeps saying it was really an accident; she’s been a perfect brick. But I came to see her and I was in a temper; I didn’t know or care what I was doing. I was careless, and I knocked over her table; she was writing. The ink went all over the dress. I rushed out and on to the common, and she came after me to say I mustn’t be upset, as it had been an accident. I don’t know if you can think of anything more sporting or more generous. And then—then she said nobody must know; we would say it had been an accident. That was too much for me. I knew then how decent she was, and what an idiot I had been.’

There was silence in the Rose House. Tamzine’s arm tightened round her friend. ‘Hard lines, old girl!’ she said at last.

‘That lovely frock!’ Sonia gave a sob. ‘Can’t they get the stain out?’

‘But you gave Rosamund the thing she wanted most!’ Robin cried, speaking from her own experience. ‘After the first minute or two, I believe she would be glad, not sorry, Rhoda!’

‘It was worst for you,’ Gwyneth said. ‘But you did the right thing. You gave in and said you were sorry. That’s what she really wanted.’

‘It was jolly plucky to tell us,’ Daffodil began.

‘And jolly decent of you to feel you had to tell, Rho,’ Tamzine exclaimed.

‘I couldn’t keep it dark,’ Rhoda whispered. ‘Rosamund wanted me to, but I’d never have felt right, either with her or you.’

‘What about helping to set the tables, as there are so many of you?’ A tattoo on the door and a cheerful call made the group of girls spring guiltily apart.

Rosamund seemed unusually blind. She came in with a laden tray and placed it on a side table, and gave brisk orders.

‘Fancy shutting out your tea like that! Choose your tables and pull one close to Rhoda’s throne. She must pour out, so she’ll need a table to herself. Arrange yourselves and your cups and plates, and I’ll fetch the food. Home-made scones and cakes, jam, bread and butter, and ices to finish with; that’s Rhoda’s programme!’

‘It sounds a gorgeous tea!’ Tamzine exclaimed, springing to help.

Eagerly the others joined her, all talking at once, to cover Rhoda’s silence. But Rosamund seemed unnoticing, and called to Gail to bring the big teapot.

‘You’ll have tea with us, won’t you?’ Robin asked.

‘Oh, yes, I’ve been invited! I want to sit with you and Gwyneth and hear all about Quellyn House. I know Sir Ivor Quellyn, the musician, a distant cousin of Robert Quellyn, the painter.’

‘It’s Plas Quellyn,’ said Gwyneth. ‘We’re always glad to talk about it.’

Rosalie called to Gail to come and sit with Daffodil and herself, and no one paid any attention to Tamzine and Sonia, who had drawn up their table beside Rhoda’s, and were talking to her quietly under cover of the noise from the rest of the room. Rosamund was deliberately very cheerful and full of talk and questions, and she did not leave Rhoda alone again with her guests. As soon as she could she drove them all back to school, where preparation for the next day’s work awaited them.

Then she went and stood beside Rhoda, who lay back on her cushions, tired out.

‘I heard you tell the girls. One of the pluckiest things I’ve ever known, my dear.’

‘Oh!’ Rhoda jumped and stared up at her. ‘How? Where were you?’

'You forgot the window. I was bringing the tea and I had to pass the window. I heard what you were up to. Couldn't you be happy without owning up, Rhoda Kane?'

'No! Oh, I couldn't! I felt so bad!' Rhoda cried.

'Feel better now?'

'Ever so much! You don't mind, do you?'

'Only for you. I'm sorry you had to go through that.'

'Rosamund, there's something I want to ask you!' Rhoda leaned forward eagerly. 'I couldn't before; I didn't feel I'd been quite fair. I feel different now. Rosamund, will you have Rosalie and me for your bridesmaids? She's frightfully keen. And now I am, too.'

Rosamund looked down at her, her face lighting up. 'Will you really? I'd simply love to have you two. I think you know that.'

'We both want it. We'll be glad.'

'I've promised to have the twins and Maidlin,' Rosamund said thoughtfully. 'I shall have to enlarge my procession! I'd have liked to have Aunt Elspeth too, but she's shy; she says it would be fearful ordeal. So she's begged off. Maid must have her own place, as my maid of honour, just behind Elizabeth and Margaret, and then you two Roses. It will be rather jolly!'

'The twins will look lovely,' Rhoda said. 'And Maidlin is your chum; you must have her. But Rosalie and I are your family, Rosamund. The family must back you up at your wedding!'

A meaning look passed between them. Then Rosamund bent and kissed her. 'Shake hands on it! I want to be backed up by the family! But you must get better. I can't have a bridesmaid in a bath-chair. That's what I said to Geoffrey.'

'Oh, but he isn't going to be a bridesmaid!'

'No, he'll be something more important. You've given me the one thing I wanted to make my wedding perfect, Rhoda-Rose. I hope your mother will come, too.'

'She will, if I'm a bridesmaid.'

'Then I shall feel the family is really backing me up!' Rosamund said joyfully. 'I'm quite looking forward to marrying into such a very nice family!'

[The end of *Rosamund's Tuck Shop* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]